THE MOST THRILLING

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD

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EDMOND HAMILTON

ROBERT SILVERBERG

ROGER ZELAZNY

J. G. BALLARD

HENRY HASSE

ADAM CHASE

GERALD VANCE

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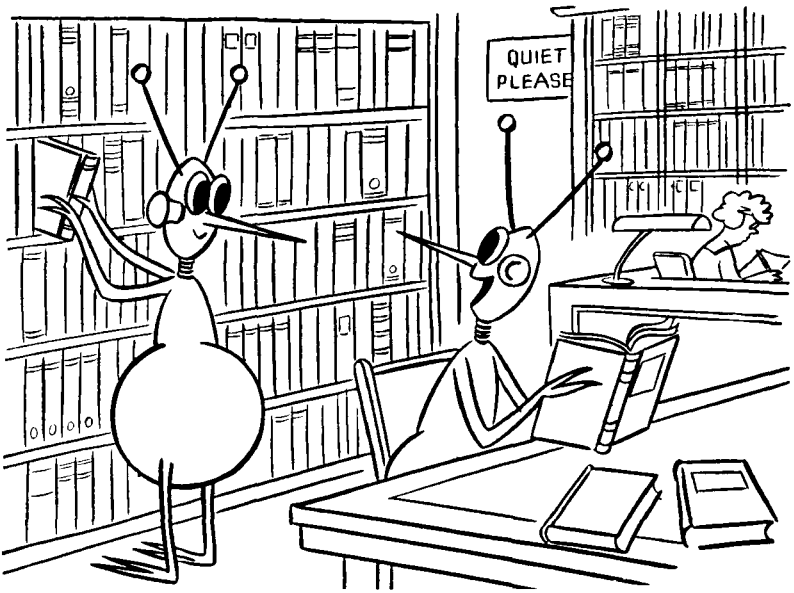

"It says here that Mars is uninhabited. We'd better rush back and find out where everybody went."

"It says we should travel and meet new people."

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EDMOND HAMILTON	4	THE STARS, MY BROTHERS
HENRY HASSE	43	THE BEGINNING
ROBERT SILVERBERG	60	DARK COMPANION
ADAM CHASE	84	HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT IT
GERALD VANCE	97	THE LAVENDER TALENT
J.G. BALLARD	109	PASSPORT TO ETERNITY
ROGER ZELAZNY	128	THE MISFIT

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THE STARS, MY BROTHERS

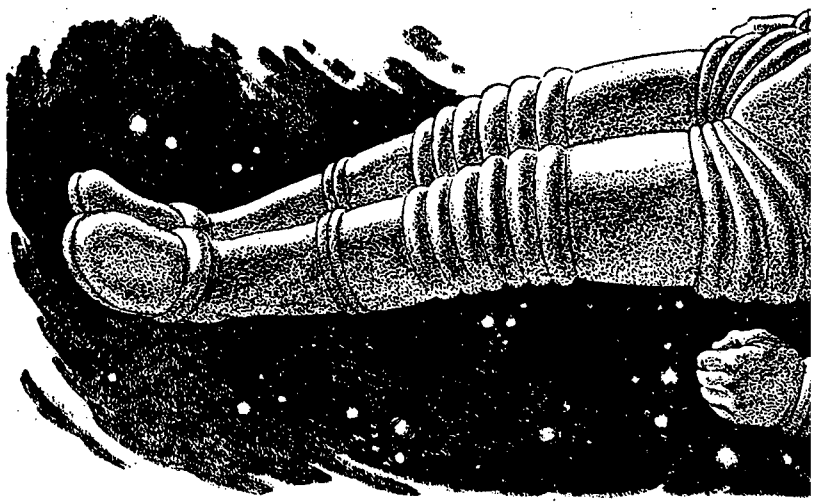
By EDMOND HAMILTON

He was afraid—not of the present or the future, but of the past. He was afraid of the thing tagged Reed Kieran, that stiff blind voiceless thing wheeling its slow orbit around the Moon, companion to dead worlds and silent space.

1.

SOMETHING tiny went wrong, but no one ever knew whether it was in an electric relay or in the brain of the pilot.

The pilot was Lieutenant Charles Wandek, UNRC, home



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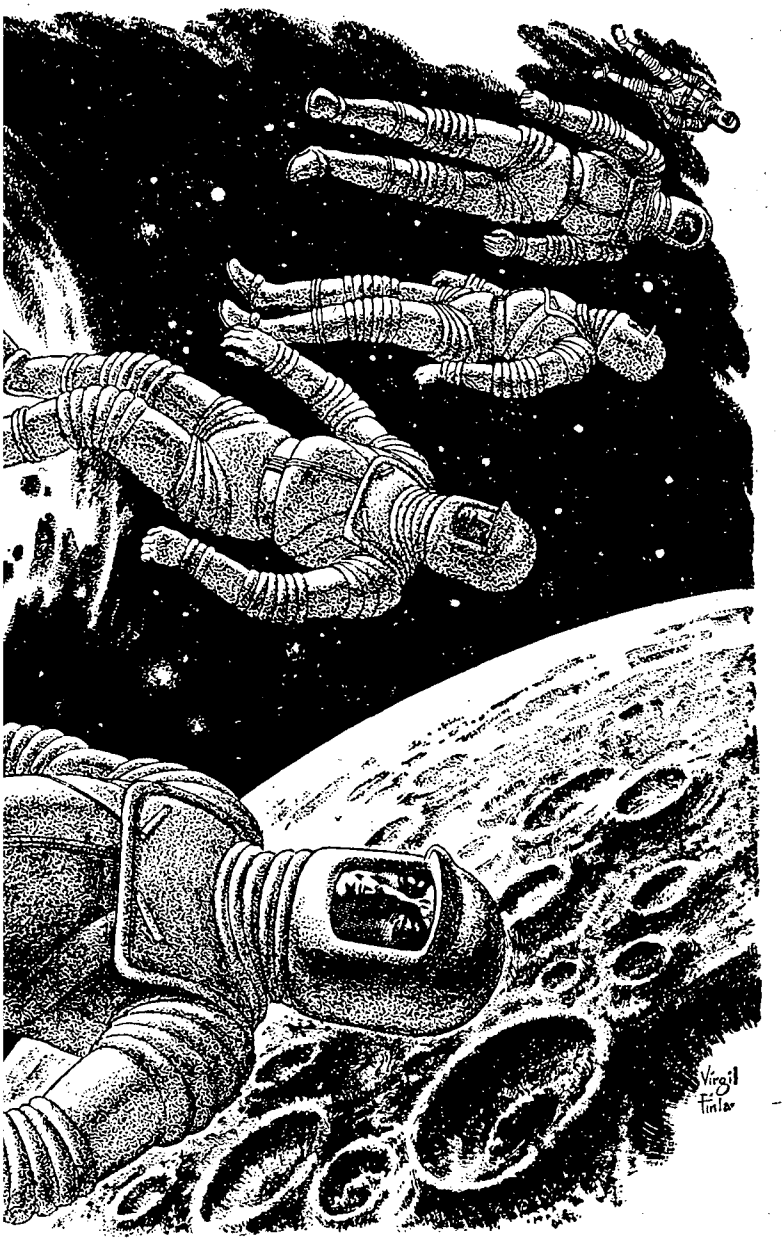

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address 1677 Anstey Avenue, Detroit. He did not survive the crash of his ferry into Wheel Five. Neither did his three passengers, a young French astrophysicist, an East Indian expert on magnetic fields, and a forty-year old man from Philadelphia who was coming out to replace a pump technician.

Someone else who did not survive was Reed Kieran, the only man in Wheel Five itself to lose his life. Kieran, who was thirty-six years old, was an accredited scientist-employee of UNRC. Home address: 815 Elm Street, Midland Springs, Ohio.

Kieran, despite the fact that he was a confirmed bachelor, was in Wheel Five because of a woman. But the woman who had sent him there was no beautiful lost love. Her name was Gertrude Lemmiken, she was nineteen years old and overweight, with a fat, stupid face. She suffered from head-colds and sniffed constantly in the Ohio college classroom where Kieran taught Physics Two.

One March morning, Kieran could bear it no longer. He told himself, "If she sniffs this morning, I'm through. I'll resign and join the UNRC."

Gertrude sniffed. Six months later, having finished his training for the United Nations Reconnaissance Corps, Kieran shipped out for a term of duty in UNRC Space Laboratory Number 5, known more familiarly as Wheel Five.

Wheel Five circled the Moon. There was an elaborate base on the surface of the Moon in this year 1981. There were laboratories and observatories there, too. But it had been found that the alternating fortnights of boiling heat and near-absolute-zero cold on the lunar surface could play havoc with the delicate instruments used in certain researches. Hence Wheel Five had been built and was staffed by research men who were rotated at regular eight-month intervals.

KIERAN loved it, from the first. He thought that that was because of the sheer beauty of it, the gaunt, silver deaths-head of the Moon forever turning beneath, the still and solemn glory of the undimmed stars, the filamentaries stretched across the distant star-clusters like shining veils, the quietness, the peace.

But Kieran had a certain intellectual honesty, and after a while he admitted to himself that neither the beauty nor the romance of it was what made this life so attractive to him. It was the fact that he was far away from Earth. He did not even have to look at Earth, for nearly all geophysical research was taken care of by Wheels Two and Three that circled the mother planet. He was almost completely di-

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vorced from all Earth's problems and people.

Kieran liked people, but had never felt that he understood them. What seemed important to them, all the drives of ordinary day-to-day existence, had never seemed very important to him. He had felt that there must be something wrong with him, something lacking, for it seemed to him that people everywhere committed the most outlandish follies, believed in the most incredible things, were swayed by pure herd-instinct into the most harmful courses of behavior. They could not all be wrong, he thought, so he must be wrong—and it had worried him. He had taken partial refuge in pure science, but the study and then the teaching of astrophysics had not been the refuge that Wheel Five was. He would be sorry to leave the Wheel when his time was up.

And he was sorry, when the day came. The others of the staff were already out in the docking lock in the rim, waiting to greet the replacements from the ferry. Kieran, hating to leave, lagged behind. Then, realizing it would be churlish not to meet this young Frenchman who was replacing him, he hurried along the corridor in the big spoke when he saw the ferry coming in.

He was two-thirds of the way along the spoke to the rim when it happened. There was a tremendous crash that flung him violently from his feet. He felt a coldness, instant and terrible.

He was dying.

He was dead.

The ferry had been coming in on a perfectly normal approach when the tiny something went wrong, in the ship or in the judgment of the pilot. Its drive-rockets suddenly blasted on full, it heeled over sharply, it smashed through the big starboard spoke like a knife through butter.

Wheel Five staggered, rocked, and floundered. The automatic safety bulkheads had all closed, and the big spoke—Section T2—was the only section to blow its air, and Kieran was the only man caught in it. The alarms went off, and while the wreckage of the ferry, with three dead men in it, was still drifting close by, everyone in the Wheel was in his pressure-suit and emergency measures were in full force.

WITHIN thirty minutes it became evident that the Wheel was going to survive this accident. It was edging slowly out of orbit from the impetus of the blow, and in the present weakened state of the construction its small corrective rockets could not be used to stop the drift. But Meloni, the UNRC captain commanding, had got first reports from his damage-control teams, and it did not look too bad. He

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fired off peremptory demands for the repair materials he would need, and was assured by UNRC headquarters at Mexico City that the ferries would be loaded and on their way as soon as possible.

Meloni was just beginning to relax a little when a young officer brought up a minor but vexing problem. Lieutenant Vinson had headed the small party sent out to recover the bodies of the four dead men. In their pressure-suits they had been pawing through the tangled wreckage for some time, and young Vinson was tired when he made his report.

"We have all four alongside, sir. The three men in the ferry were pretty badly mangled in the crash. Kieran wasn't physically wounded, but died from space-asphyxiation."

The captain stared at him. "Alongside? Why didn't you bring them in? They'll go back in one of the ferries to Earth for burial."

"But—" Vinson started to protest.

Meloni interrupted sharply. "You need to learn a few things about morale, Lieutenant. You think it's going to do morale here any good to have four dead men floating alongside where everyone can see them? Fetch them in and store them in one of the holds."

Vinson, sweating and unhappy now, had visions of a black mark on his record, and determined to make his point.

"But about Kieran, sir—he was only frozen. Suppose there was a chance to bring him back?"

"Bring him back? What the devil are you talking about?"

Vinson said, "I read they're trying to find some way of restoring a man that gets space-frozen. Some scientists down at Delhi University. If they succeeded, and if we had Kieran still intact in space—"

"Oh, hell, that's just a scientific pipe-dream, they'll never find a way to do that," Meloni said. "It's all just theory."

"Yes, sir," said Vinson, hanging his head.

"We've got trouble enough here without you bringing up ideas like this," the captain continued angrily. "Get out of here."

Vinson was now completely crushed. "Yes, sir. I'll bring the bodies in."

HE went out. Meloni stared at the door, and began to think. A commanding officer had to be careful, or he could get skinned alive. If, by some remote chance, this Delhi idea ever succeeded, he, Meloni, would be in for it for having Kieran buried. He strode to the door and flung it open, mentally cursing the young snotty who had had to bring this up.

"Vinson!" he shouted.

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The lieutenant turned back, startled. "Yes, sir?"

"Hold Kieran's body outside. I'll check on this with Mexico City.

"Yes, sir."

Still angry, Meloni shot a message to Personnel at Mexico City. That done, he forgot about it. The buck had been passed, let the boys sitting on their backsides down on Earth handle it.

Colonel Hausman, second in command of Personnel Division of UNRC, was the man to whom Meloni's message went. He snorted loudly when he read it. And later, when he went in to report to Garces, the brigadier commanding the Division, he took the message with him.

"Meloni must be pretty badly rattled by the crash," he said. "Look at this."

Garces read the message, then looked up. "Anything to this? The Delhi experiments, I mean?"

Hausman had taken care to brief himself on that point and was able to answer emphatically.

"Damned little. Those chaps in Delhi have been playing around freezing insects and thawing them out, and they think the process might be developed someday to where it could revive frozen spacemen. It's an iffy idea. I'll burn Meloni's backside off for bringing it up at a time like this."

Garces, after a moment, shook his head. "No, wait. Let me think about this."

He looked speculatively out of the window for a few moments. Then he said,

"Message Meloni that this one chap's body—what's his name, Kieran?—is to be preserved in space against a chance of future revival."

Hausman nearly blotted his copybook by exclaiming, "For God's sake—" He choked that down in time and said, "But it could be centuries before a revival process is perfected, if it ever is."

Garces nodded. "I know. But you're missing a psychological point that could be valuable to UNRC. This Kieran has relatives, doesn't he?"

Hausman nodded. "A widowed mother and a sister. His father's been dead a long time. No wife or children."

Garces said, "If we tell them he's dead, frozen in space and then buried, it's all over with. Won't those people feel a lot better if we tell them that he's *apparently* dead, but might be brought back when a revival-technique is perfected in the future?"

"I suppose they'd feel better about it," Hausman conceded. "But I don't see—"

Garces shrugged. "Simple. We're only really beginning in space, you know. As we go on,

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UNRC is going to lose a number of men, spacestruck just like Kieran. A howl will go up about our casualty lists, it always does. But if we can say that they're only frozen until such time as revival technique is achieved, everyone will feel better about it."

"I suppose public relations are important—" Hausman began to say, and Garces nodded quickly.

"They are. See that this is done, when you go up to confer with Meloni. Make sure that it gets onto the video networks, I want everyone to see it."

Later, with many cameras and millions of people watching, Kieran's body, in a pressure-suit, was ceremoniously taken to a selected position where it would orbit the Moon. All suggestions of the funerary were carefully avoided. The spacestruck man—nobody at all referred to him as "dead"—would remain in this position until a revival process was perfected.

"Until forever," thought Hausman, watching sourly. "I suppose Garces is right. But they'll have a whole graveyard here, as time goes on."

As time went on, they did.

2.

IN HIS dreams, a soft voice whispered.

He did not know what it was telling him, except that it was important. He was hardly aware of its coming, the times it came. There would be the quiet murmuring, and something in him seemed to hear and understand, and then the murmur faded away and there was nothing but the dreams again.

But were they dreams? Nothing had form or meaning. Light, darkness, sound, pain and not-pain, flowed over him. Flowed over—who? Who was he? He did not even know that. He did not care.

But he came to care, the question vaguely nagged him. He should try to remember. There was more than dreams and the whispering voice. There was—what? If he had one real thing to cling to, to put his feet on and climb back from—One thing like his name.

He had no name. He was no one. Sleep and forget it. Sleep and dream and listen—

"Kieran"

It went across his brain like a shattering bolt of lightning, that word. He did not know what the word was or what it meant but it found an echo somewhere and his brain screamed it.

"Kieran!"

Not his brain alone, his voice was gasping it, harshly and croakingly, his lungs seeming on fire as they expelled the word.

He was shaking. He had a body that could shake, that could

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feel pain, that was feeling pain now. He tried to move, to break the nightmare, to get back again to the vague dreams, and the soothing whisper.

He moved. His limbs thrashed leadenly, his chest heaved and panted, his eyes opened.

He lay in a narrow bunk in a very small metal room.

He looked slowly around. He did not know this place. The gleaming white metal of walls and ceiling was unfamiliar. There was a slight, persistent tingling vibration in everything that was unfamiliar, too.

He was not in Wheel Five. He had seen every cell in it and none of them were like this. Also, there lacked the persistent susurrant sound of the ventilation pumps. Where—

You're in a ship, Kieran. A star-ship.

SOMETHING back in his mind told him that. But of course it was ridiculous, a quirk of the imagination. There weren't any star-ships.

You're all right, Kieran. You're in a star-ship, and you're all right.

The emphatic assurance came from somewhere back in his brain and it was comforting. He didn't feel very good, he felt dopey and sore, but there was no use worrying about it when he knew for sure he was all right—

The hell he was all right! He was in someplace new, someplace strange, and he felt half sick and he was not all right at all. Instead of lying here on his back listening to comforting lies from his imagination, he should get up, find out what was going on, what had happened.

Of a sudden, memory began to clear. What *had* happened? Something, a crash, a terrible coldness—

Kieran began to shiver. He had been in Section T-2, on his way to the lock, and suddenly the floor had risen under him and Wheel Five had seemed to crash into pieces around him. The cold, the pain—

You're in a star-ship. You're all right.

For God's sake why did his mind keep telling him things like that, things he believed? For if he did not believe them he would be in a panic, not knowing where he was, how he had come here. There was panic in his mind but there was a barrier against it, the barrier of the soothing reassurances that came from he knew not where.

He tried to sit up. It was useless, he was too weak. He lay, breathing heavily. He felt that he should be hysterical with fear but somehow he was not, that barrier in his mind prevented it.

He had decided to try shouting when a door in the side of the lit-

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tle room slid open and a man came in.

He came over and looked down at Kieran. He was a young man, sandy-haired, with a compact, chunky figure and a flat, hard face. His eyes were blue and intense, and they gave Kieran the feeling that this man was a wound-up spring. He looked down and said,

"How do you feel, Kieran?"

Kieran looked up at him. He asked, "Am I in a star-ship?"

"Yes."

"But there aren't any star-ships."

"There are. You're in one." The sandy-haired man added, "My name is Vaillant."

It's true, what he says, murmured the something in Kieran's mind.

"Where—how—" Kieran began.

Vaillant interrupted his stammering question. "As to where, we're quite a way from Earth, heading right now in the general direction of Altair. As to how—" He paused, looking keenly down at Kieran. "Don't you know how?"

Of course I know. I was frozen, and now I have been awakened and time has gone by—

Vaillant, looking searchingly down at his face, showed a trace of relief. "You do know, don't you? For a moment I was afraid it hadn't worked."

He sat down on the edge of the bunk.

"How long?" asked Kieran.

Vaillant answered as casually as though it was the most ordinary question in the world. "A bit over a century."

IT WAS wonderful, thought Kieran, how he could take a statement like that without getting excited. It was almost as though he'd known it all the time.

"How—" he began, when there was an interruption.

Something buzzed thinly in the pocket of Vaillant's shirt. He took out a thin three-inch disk of metal and said sharply into it, "Yes?"

A tiny voice squawked from the disk. It was too far from Kieran for him to understand what it was saying but it had a note of excitement, almost of panic, in it.

Something changed, hardened, in Vaillant's flat face. He said, "I expected it. I'll be right there. You know what to do."

He did something to the disk and spoke into it again. "Paula, take over here."

He stood up. Kieran looked up at him, feeling numb and stupid. "I'd like to know some things."

"Later," said Vaillant. "We've got troubles. Stay where you are."

He went rapidly out of the room. Kieran looked after him,

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wondering. Troubles—troubles in a starship? And a century had passed—

He suddenly felt an emotion that shook his nerves and tightened his guts. It was beginning to hit him now. He sat up in the bunk and swung his legs out of it and tried to stand but could not, he was too weak. All he could do was to sit there, shaking.

His mind could not take it in. It seemed only minutes ago that he had been walking along the corridor in Wheel Five. It seemed that Wheel Five must exist, that the Earth, the people, the time he knew, must still be somewhere out there. This could be some kind of a joke, or some kind of psychological experiment. That was it—the space-medicine boys were always making way-out experiments to find out how men would bear up in unusual conditions, and this must be one of them—

A woman came into the room. She was a dark woman who might have been thirty years old, and who wore a white shirt and slacks. She would, he thought, have been good-looking if she had not looked so tired and so edgy.

She came over and looked down at him and said to him,

"Don't try to get up yet. You'll feel better very soon."

Her voice was a slightly husky one. It was utterly familiar to Kieran, and yet he had never seen this woman before. Then it came to him.

"You were the one who talked to me," he said, looking up at her. "In the dreams, I mean."

She nodded. "I'm Paula Ray and I'm a psychologist. You had to be psychologically prepared for your awakening."

"Prepared?"

The woman explained patiently. "Hypnopedic technique—establishing facts in the subconscious of a sleeping patient. Otherwise, it would be too terrific a shock for you when you awakened. That was proved when they first tried reviving space-struck men, forty or fifty years ago."

THE comfortable conviction that this was all a fake, an experiment of some kind, began to drain out of Kieran. But if it was true—

He asked, with some difficulty, "You say that they found out how to revive space-frozen men, that long ago?"

"Yes."

"Yet it took forty or fifty years to get around to reviving me?"

The woman sighed. "You have a misconception. The process of revival was perfected that long ago. But it has been used only immediately after a wreck or disaster. Men or women in the old space-cemeteries have not been revived."

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"Why not?" he asked carefully.

"Unsatisfactory results," she said. "They could not adjust psychologically to changed conditions. They usually became unbalanced. Some suicides and a number of cases of extreme schizophrenia resulted. It was decided that it was no kindness to the older space-struck cases to bring them back."

"But you brought me back?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"There were good reasons." She was, clearly, evading that question. She went on quickly. "The psychological shock of awakening would have been devastating, if you were not prepared. So, while you were still under sedation, I used the hypnopedic method on you. Your unconscious was aware of the main facts of the situation before you awoke, and that cushioned the shock."

Kieran thought of himself, lying frozen and dead in a graveyard that was space, bodies drifting in orbit, circling slowly around each other as the years passed, in a macabre sarabande —A deep shiver shook him.

"Because all space-struck victims were in pressure-suits, dehydration was not the problem it could have been," Paula was saying. "But it's still a highly delicate process—"

He looked at her and interrupted roughly. "What reasons?" And when she stared blankly, he added, "You said there were good reasons why you picked me for revival. What reasons?"

Her face became tight and alert. "You were the oldest victim, in point of date. That was one of the determining factors—"

"Look," said Kieran. "I'm not a child, nor yet a savage. You can drop the patronizing professional jargon and answer my question."

Her voice became hard and brittle. "You're new to this environment. You wouldn't understand if I told you."

"Try me."

"All right," she answered. "We need you, as a symbol, in a political struggle we're waging against the Sakae."

"The Sakae?"

"I told you that you couldn't understand yet," she answered impatiently, turning away. "You can't expect me to fill you in on a whole world that's new to you, in five minutes."

She started toward the door. "Oh, no," said Kieran. "You're not going yet."

He slid out of the bunk. He felt weak and shaky but resentment energized his flaccid muscles. He took a step toward her.

The lights suddenly went dim, and a bull-throated roar sounded

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from somewhere, an appalling sound of raw power. The slight tingling that Kieran had felt in the metal fabric around him abruptly became a vibration so deep and powerful that it dizzied him and he had to grab the stanchion of the bunk to keep from falling.

Alarm had flashed into the woman's face. Next moment, from some hidden speaker in the wall, a male voice yelled sharply,

"Overtaken—prepare for extreme evasion—"

"Get back into the bunk," she told Kieran.

"What is it?"

"It may be," she said with a certain faint viciousness, "that you're about to die a second time."

3.

THE lights dimmed to semi-darkness, and the deep vibration grew worse. Kieran clutched the woman's arm.

"What's happening?"

"Damn it, let me go!" she said.

The exclamation was so wholly familiar in its human angriness that Kieran almost liked her, for the first time. But he continued to hold onto her, although he did not feel that with his present weakness he could hold her long.

"I've a right to know," he said.

"All right, perhaps you have," said Paula. "We—our group—are operating against authority. We've broken laws, in going to Earth and reviving you. And now authority is catching up to us."

"Another ship? Is there going to be a fight?"

"A fight?" She stared at him, and shock and then faint repulsion showed in her face. "But of course, you come from the old time of wars, you would think that—"

Kieran got the impression that what he had said had made her look at him with the same feelings he would have had when he looked at a decent, worthy savage who happened to be a cannibal.

"I always felt that bringing you back was a mistake," she said, with a sharpness in her voice. "Let me go."

She wrenched away from him and before he could stop her she had got to the door and slid it open. He woke up in time to lurch after her and he got his shoulder into the door-opening before she could slide it shut.

"Oh, very well, since you insist I'm not going to worry about you," she said rapidly, and turned and hurried away.

Kieran wanted to follow her but his knees were buckling under him. He hung to the side of the door-opening. He felt angry, and anger was all that kept him from falling over. He would not faint, he told himself. He was not

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a child, and would not be treated like one—

He got his head outside the door. There was a long and very narrow corridor out there, blank metal with a few closed doors along it. One door, away down toward the end of the corridor, was just sliding shut.

HE started down the corridor, steadying himself with his hand against the smooth wall. Before he had gone more than a few steps, the anger that pushed him began to ebb away. Of a sudden, the mountainous and incredible fact of his being here, in this place, this time, this ship, came down on him like an avalanche from which the hypnopedic pre-conditioning would no longer protect him.

I am touching a starship, I am in a starship, I, Reed Kieran of Midland Springs, Ohio. I ought to be back there, teaching my classes, stopping at Hartnett's Drug Store for a soft drink on the way home, but I am here in a ship fleeing through the stars . . .

His head was spinning and he was afraid that he was going to go out again. He found himself at the door and slid it open and fell rather than walked inside. He heard a startled voice.

This was a bigger room. There was a table whose top was translucent and which showed a bewildering mass of fleeting symbols in bright light, ever changing. There was a screen on one wall of the room and that showed nothing, a blank, dark surface.

Vaillant and Paula Ray and a tall, tough-looking man of middle age were around the table and had looked up, surprised.

Vaillant's face flashed irritation. "Paula, you were supposed to keep him in his cabin!"

"I didn't think he was strong enough to follow," she said.

"I'm not," said Kieran, and pitched over.

The tall middle-aged man reached and caught him before he hit the floor, and eased him into a chair.

He heard, as though from a great distance, Vaillant's voice saying irritatedly, "Let Paula take care of him, Webber. Look at this—we're going to cross another rift—"

There were a few minutes then when everything was very jumbled up in Kieran's mind. The woman was talking to him. She was telling him that they had prepared him physically, as well as psychologically, for the shock of revival, and that he would be quite all right but had to take things more slowly.

He heard her voice but paid little attention. He sat in the chair and blankly watched the two men who hung over the table and its flow of brilliant symbols. Vail-

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lant seemed to tighten up more and more as the moments passed, and there was still about him the look of a coiled spring but now the spring seemed to be wound to the breaking-point. Webber, the tall man with the tough face, watched the fleeting symbols and his face was stony.

"Here we go," he muttered, and both he and Vaillant looked up at the blank black screen on the wall.

Kieran looked too. There was nothing. Then, in an instant, the blackness vanished from the screen and it framed a vista of such cosmic, stunning splendor that Kieran could not grasp it.

STARS blazed like high fires across the screen, loops and chains and shining clots of them. This was not too different from the way they had looked from Wheel Five. But what was different was that the starry firmament was partly blotted out by vast rifted ramparts of blackness, ebon cliffs that went up to infinity. Kieran had seen astronomical photographs like this and knew what the blackness was.

Dust. A dust so fine that its percentage of particles in space would be a vacuum, on Earth. But, here where it extended over parsecs of space, it formed a barrier to light. There was a narrow rift here between the titan cliffs of darkness and he—the ship he was in—was fleeing across that rift.

THE screen abruptly went black again. Kieran remained sitting and staring at it. That incredible fleeting vision had finally impressed the utter reality of all this upon his mind. They, this ship, were far from Earth—very far, in one of the dust-clouds in which they were trying to lose pursuers. This was real.

"—will have got another fix on us as we crossed, for sure," Vaillant was saying, in a bitter voice. "They'll have the net out for us—the pattern will be shaping now and we can't slip through it."

"We can't," said Webber. "The ship can't. But the flitter can, with luck."

They both looked at Kieran. "He's the important one," Webber said. "If a couple of us could get him through—"

"No," said Paula. "We couldn't. As soon as they caught the ship and found the flitter gone, they'd be after him."

"Not to Sako," said Webber. "They'd never figure that we'd take him to Sako."

"Do I have a word in this?" asked Kieran, between his teeth.

"What?" asked Vaillant.

"This. The hell with you all. I'll go no place with you or for you."

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HE got a savage satisfaction from saying it, he was tired of sitting there like a booby while they discussed him, but he did not get the reaction from them he had expected. The two men merely continued to look thoughtfully at him. The woman sighed,

"You see? There wasn't time enough to explain it to him. It's natural for him to react with hostility."

"Put him out, and take him along," said Webber.

"No," said Paula sharply. "If he goes out right now he's liable to stay out: I won't answer for it."

"Meanwhile," said Vaillant with an edge to his voice, "the pattern is forming up. Have you any suggestions, Paula?"

She nodded. "This."

She suddenly squeezed something under Kieran's nose, a small thing that she had produced from her pocket without his noticing it, in his angry preoccupation with the two men. He smelled a sweet, refreshing odor and he struck her arm away.

"Oh, no, you're not giving me any more dopes—" Then he stopped, for suddenly it all seemed wryly humorous to him. "A bunch of bloody incompetents," he said, and laughed. "This is the one thing I would never have dreamed—that a man could sleep, and wake up in a starship, and find the starship manned by blunderers."

"Euphoric," said Paula, to the two men.

"At that," said Webber sourly, "there may be something in what he says about us."

Vaillant turned on him and said fiercely, "If that's what you think—" Then he controlled himself and said tightly, "Quarrelling's no good. We're in a box but we can maybe still put it over if we get this man to Sako. Webber, you and Paula take him in the flitter."

Kieran rose to his feet. "Fine," he said gaily. "Let us go in the flitter, whatever that is. I am already bored with starships."

He felt good, very good. He felt a little drunk, not enough to impede his mental processes but enough to give him a fine devil-may-care indifference to what happened next. So it was only the spray Paula had given him—it still made his body feel better and removed his shock and worry and made everything seem suddenly rather amusing.

"Let us to Sako in the flitter," he said. "After all, I'm living on velvet, I might as well see the whole show. I'm sure that Sako, wherever it is, will be just as full of human folly as Earth was."

"He's euphoric," Paula said again, but her face was stricken.

"Of all the people in that space-cemetery, we had to pick one who

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thinks like that," said Vaillant, with a sort of restrained fury.

"You said yourself that the oldest one would be the best," said Webber. "Sako will change him."

Kieran walked down the corridor with Webber and Paula and he laughed as he walked. They had brought him back from nothingness without his consent, violating the privacy of death or near-death, and now something that he had just said had bitterly disappointed them.

"Come along," he said buoyantly to the two. "Let us not lag. Once aboard the flitter and the girl is mine."

"Oh for God's sake shut up," said Webber.

4.

IT WAS ridiculous to be flying the stars with a bad hangover, but Kieran had one. His head ached dully, he had an unpleasant metallic taste in his mouth, and his former ebullience had given way to a dull depression. He looked sourly around.

He sat in a confined little metal coop of a cabin, hardly enough in which to stand erect. Paula Ray, in a chair a few feet away was sleeping, her head on her breast. Webber sat forward, in what appeared to be a pilot-chair with a number of crowded control banks in front of it. He was not doing anything to the controls. He looked as though he might be sleeping, too.

That was all—a tiny metal room, blank metal walls, silence. They were, presumably, flying between the stars at incredible speeds but their was nothing to show it. There were no screens such as the one he had seen in the ship, to show by artful scanning devices what vista of suns and darknesses lay outside.

"A flitter," Webber had informed him, "just doesn't have room for the complicated apparatus that such scanners require. Seeing is a luxury you dispense with in a flitter. We'll see when we get to Sako."

After a moment he had added, "If we get to Sako."

Kieran had merely laughed then, and had promptly gone to sleep. When he had awakened, it had been with the euphoria all gone and with his present hangover.

"At least," he told himself, "I can truthfully say that this one wasn't my fault. That blasted spray—"

He looked resentfully at the sleeping woman in the chair. Then he reached and roughly shook her shoulder.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, first sleepily and then with resentment.

"You had no right to wake me up," she said.

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Then, before Kieran could retort, she seemed to realize the monumental irony of what she had just said, and she burst into laughter.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Go ahead and say it. I had no right to wake *you*-up."

"Let's come back to that," said Kieran after a moment. "Why did you?"

Paula looked at him ruefully. "What I need now is a ten-volume history of the last century, and time enough for you to read it. But since we don't have either —" She broke off, then after a pause asked, "Your date was 1981, wasn't it? It and your name were on the tag of your pressure-suit."

"That's right."

"Well, then. Back in 1981, it was expected that men would spread out to the stars, wasn't it?"

Kieran nodded. "As soon as they had a workable high-speed drive. Several drives were being experimented with even then."

"One of them—the Flournoy principle—was finally made workable," she said. She frowned. "I'm trying to give you this briefly and I keep straying into details."

"Just tell me why you woke me up."

"I'm *trying* to tell you." She asked candidly, "Were you always so damned hateful or did the revivification process do this to you?"

Kieran grinned. "All right. Go ahead."

THINGS happened pretty much as people foresaw back in 1981," she said. "The drive was perfected. The ships went out to the nearer stars. They found worlds. They established colonies from the overflowing population of Earth. They found human indigenous races on a few worlds, all of them at a rather low technical level, and they taught them.

"There was a determination from the beginning to make it one universe. No separate nationalistic groups, no chance of wars. The governing council was set up at Altair Two. Every world was represented. There are twenty-nine of them, now. It's expected to go on like that, till there are twenty-nine hundred starworlds represented there, twenty-nine thousand—any number. But—"

Kieran had been listening closely. "But what? What upset this particular utopia?"

"Sako."

"This world we're going to?"

"Yes," she said soberly. "Men found something different about this world when they reached it. It had people—human people—on it, very low in the scale of civilization."

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"Well, what was the problem? Couldn't you start teaching them as you had others?"

She shook her head. "It would take a long while. But that wasn't the real problem. It was—You see, there's another race on Sako beside the human ones, and it's a fairly civilized race. The Sakae. The trouble is—the Sakae aren't human."

Kieran stared at her. "So what? If they're intelligent—"

"You talk as though it was the simplest thing in the world," she flashed.

"Isn't it? If your Sakae are intelligent and the humans of Sako aren't, then the Sakae have the rights on that world, don't they?"

She looked at him, not saying anything, and again she had that stricken look of one who has tried and failed. Then from up forward, without turning, Webber spoke.

"What do you think now of Vaillant's fine idea, Paula?"

"It can still work," she said, but there was no conviction in her voice.

"If you don't mind," said Kieran, with an edge to his voice, "I'd still like to know what this Sako business has to do with reviving me."

THE Sakae rule the humans on that world," Paula answered. "There are some of us who don't believe they should. In the Council, we're known as the Humanity Party, because we believe that humans should not be ruled by non-humans."

Again, Kieran was distracted from his immediate question—this time by the phrase "Non-human".

"These Sakae—what are they like?"

"They're not monsters, if that's what you're thinking of," Paula said. "They're bipeds—lizardoid rather than humanoid—and are a fairly intelligent and law-abiding lot."

"If they're all that, and higher in development than the humans, why shouldn't they rule their own world?" demanded Kieran.

Webber uttered a sardonic laugh. Without turning he asked, "Shall I change course and go to Altair?"

"No!" she said. Her eyes flashed at Kieran and she spoke almost breathlessly. "You're very sure about things you just heard about, aren't you? You know what's right and you know what's wrong, even though you've only been in this time, this universe, for a few hours!"

Kieran looked at her closely. He thought he was beginning to get a glimmer of the shape of things now."

"You—all you who woke me up illegally—you belong to this

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Humanity Party, don't you? You did it for some reason connected with that?"

"Yes," she answered defiantly. "We need a symbol in this political struggle. We thought that one of the oldtime space pioneers, one of the humans who began the conquest of the stars, would be it. We—"

Kieran interrupted. "I think I get it. It was really considerate of you. You drag a man back from what amounts to death, for a party rally. 'Oldtime space hero condemns non-humans'—it would go something like that, wouldn't it?"

"Listen—," she began.

"Listen, hell," he said. He was hot with rage, shaking with it. "I am glad to say that you could not possibly have picked a worse symbol than me. I have no more use for the idea of the innate sacred superiority of one species over another than I had for that of one kind of man over another."

Her face changed. From an angry woman, she suddenly became a professional psychologist, coolly observing reactions.

"It's not the political question you really resent," she said. "You've wakened to a strange world and you're afraid of it, in spite of all the pre-awakening preparation we gave your subconscious. You're afraid, and so you're angry."

Kieran got a grip on himself. He shrugged. "What you say may be true. But it doesn't change the way I feel. I will not help you one damned bit."

Webber got up from his seat and came back toward them, his tall form stooping. He looked at Kieran and then at the woman.

"We have to settle this right now," he said. "We're getting near enough to Sako to go out of drive. Are we going to land or aren't we?"

"Yes," said Paula steadily. "We're landing."

Webber glanced again at Kieran's face. "But if that's the way he feels—"

"Go ahead and land," she said.

5.

IT WAS nothing like landing in a rocket. First there was the business referred to as "going out of drive". Paula made Kieran strap in and she said, "You may find this unpleasant, but just sit tight. It doesn't last long." Kieran sat stiff and glowering, prepared for anything and determined not to show it no matter how he felt. Then Webber did something to the control board and the universe fell apart. Kieran's stomach came up and stuck in his throat. He was falling—up? Down? Sideways? He didn't know, but whichever it was not all the parts of him were

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falling at the same rate, or perhaps it was not all in the same direction, he didn't know that either, but it was an exceptionally hideous feeling. He opened his mouth to protest, and all of a sudden he was sitting normally in the chair in the normal cabin and screaming at the top of his lungs.

He shut up.

Paula said, "I told you it would be unpleasant."

"So you did," said Kieran. He sat, sweating. His hands and feet were cold.

Now for the first time he became aware of motion. The flitter seemed to hurtle forward at comet-like speed. Kieran knew that this was merely an ironic little joke, because now they were proceeding at something in the range of normal velocity, whereas before their speed had been quite beyond his comprehension. But he could comprehend this. He could feel it. They were going like a bat out of hell, and somewhere ahead of them was a planet, and he was closed in, blind, a mouse in a nose-cone. His insides writhed with helplessness and the imminence of a crash. He wanted very much to start screaming again, but Paula was watching him.

In a few moments that desire became academic. A whistling shriek began faintly outside the hull and built swiftly to a point where nothing could have been heard above it. Atmosphere. And somewhere under the blind wall of the flitter a rock-hard world-face reeling and rushing, leaping to meet them—

THE flitter slowed. It seemed to hang motionless, quivering faintly. Then it dropped. Express elevator in the world's tallest building, top to bottom—only the elevator is a bubble and the wind is tossing it from side to side as it drops and there is no bottom.

They hung again, bounding lightly on the unseen wind.

Then down.

And hang again.

And down.

Paula said suddenly, "Webber. Webber, I think he's dying." She began to unstrap.

Kieran said faintly, "Am I turning green?"

She looked at him, frowning. "Yes."

"A simple old malady. I'm seasick. Tell Webber to quit playing humming-bird and put this thing down."

Paula made an impatient gesture and tightened her belt again.

Hang and drop. Once more, twice more. A little rocking bounce, a light thump, motion ceased. Webber turned a series of switches. Silence.

Kieran said, "Air?"

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WEBBER opened a hatch in the side of the cabin. Light poured in. It had to be sunlight, Kieran knew, but it was a queer color, a sort of tawny orange that carried a pleasantly burning heat. He got loose with Paula helping him and tottered to the hatch. The air smelled of clean sun-warmed dust and some kind of vegetation. Kieran climbed out of the flitter, practically throwing himself out in his haste. He wanted solid ground under him, he didn't care whose or where.

And as his boots thumped onto the red-ochre sand, it occurred to him that it had been a very long time since he had had solid ground underfoot. A very long time indeed—

His insides knotted up again, and this time it was not seasickness but fear, and he was cold all through again in spite of the hot new sun.

He was afraid, not of the present, nor of the future, but of the past. He was afraid of the thing tagged Reed Kieran, the stiff blind voiceless thing wheeling its slow orbit around the Moon, companion to dead worlds and dead space, brother to the cold and the dark.

He began to tremble.

Paula shook him. She was talking but he couldn't hear her. He could only hear the rush of eternal darkness past his ears, the thin squeak of his shadow brushing across the stars. Webber's face was somewhere above him, looking angry and disgusted. He was talking to Paula, shaking his head. They were far away. Kieran was losing them, drifting away from them on the black tide. Then suddenly there was something like an explosion, a crimson flare across the black, a burst of heat against the cold. Shocked and wild, the physical part of him clawed back to reality.

Something hurt him, something threatened him. He put his hand to his cheek and it came away red.

Paula and Webber were yanking at him, trying to get him to move.

A STONE whizzed past his head. It struck the side of the flitter with a sharp clack, and fell. Kieran's nervous relays finally connected. He jumped for the open hatch. Automatically he pushed Paula ahead of him, trying to shield her, and she gave him an odd startled look. Webber was already inside. More stones rattled around and one grazed Kieran's thigh. It hurt. His cheek was bleeding freely. He rolled inside the flitter and turned to look back out the hatch. He was mad.

"Who's doing it?" he demanded.

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Paula pointed. At first Kieran was distracted by the strangeness of the landscape. The flitter crouched in a vastness of red-ochre sand laced with some low-growing plant that shone like metallic gold in the sunlight. The sand receded in tilted planes lifting gradually to a range of mountains on the right, and dropping gradually to infinity on the left. Directly in front of the flitter and quite literally a stone's throw away was the beginning of a thick belt of trees that grew beside a river, apparently quite a wide one though he could not see much but a tawny sparkling of water. The course of the river could be traced clear back to the mountains by the winding line of woods that followed its bed. The trees themselves were not like any Kieran had seen before. There seemed to be several varieties, all grotesque in shape and exotic in color. There were even some green ones, with long sharp leaves that looked like spearheads.

Exotic or not, they made perfectly adequate cover. Stones came whistling out of the woods, but Kieran could not see anything where Paula was pointing but an occasional shaking of foliage.

'Sakae?" he asked.

Webber snorted. "You'll know it when the Sakae find us. They don't throw stones."

"These are the humans," Paula said. There was an indulgent softness in her voice that irritated Kieran.

"I thought they were our dear little friends," he said.

"You frightened them."

"*I* frightened them?"

"They've seen the flitter before. But they're extremely alert to modes of behavior, and they knew you weren't acting right. They thought you were sick."

"So they tried to kill me. Nice fellows."

"Self-preservation," Webber said. "They can't afford the luxury of too much kindness."

"They're very kind among themselves," Paula said defensively. To Kieran she added, "I doubt if they were trying to kill you. They just wanted to drive you away."

"Oh, well," said Kieran, "in that case I wouldn't dream of disappointing them. Let's go."

Paula glared at him and turned to Webber. "Talk to them."

"I hope there's time," Webber grunted, glancing at the sky. "We're sitting ducks here. Keep your patient quiet—any more of that moaning and flopping and we're sunk."

HE picked up a large plastic container and moved closer to the door.

Paula looked at Kieran's cheek. "Let me fix that."

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"Don't bother," he said. At this moment he hoped the Sakae, whoever and whatever they were, would come along and clap these two into some suitable place for the rest of their lives.

Webber began to "talk".

Kieran stared at him, fascinated. He had expected words—primitive words, perhaps resembling the click-speech of Earth's stone-age survivals, but words of some sort. Webber hooted. It was a soft reassuring sound, repeated over and over, but it was not a word. The rattle of stones diminished, then stopped. Webber continued to make his hooting call. Presently it was answered. Webber turned and nodded at Paula, smiling. He reached into the plastic container and drew forth a handful of brownish objects that smelled to Kieran like dried fruit. Webber tossed these out onto the sand. Now he made a different sound, a grunting and whuffling. There was a silence. Webber made the sound again.

On the third try the people came out of the woods.

In all, there were perhaps twenty-five of them. They came slowly and furtively, moving a step or two at a time, then halting and peering, prepared to run. The able-bodied men came first, with one in the lead, a fine-looking chap in early middle age who was apparently the chief. The women, the old men, and the children followed, trickling gradually out of the shadow of the trees but remaining where they could disappear in a flash if alarmed. They were all perfectly naked, tall and slender and large-eyed, their muscles strung for speed and agility rather than massive strength. Their bodies gleamed a light bronze color in the sun, and Kieran noticed that the men were beardless and smooth-skinned. Both men and women had long hair, ranging in color from black to tawny, and very clean and glistening. They were a beautiful people, as deer are a beautiful people, graceful, innocent, and wild. The men came to the dried fruits which had been scattered for them. They picked them up and sniffed them, bit them, then began to eat, repeating the grunt-and-whuffle call. The women and children and old men decided everything was safe and joined them. Webber tossed out more fruit, and then got out himself, carrying the plastic box.

"WHAT does he do next?" whispered Kieran to Paula. "Scratch their ears? I used to tame squirrels this way when I was a kid."

"Shut up," she warned him. Webber beckoned and she nudged him to move out of the flitter. "Slow and careful."

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Kieran slid out of the flitter. Big glistening eyes swung to watch him. The eating stopped. Some of the little ones scuttled for the trees. Kieran froze. Webber hooted and whuffled some more and the tension relaxed. Kieran approached the group with Paula. There was suddenly no truth in what he was doing. He was an actor in a bad scene, mingling with impossible characters in an improbable setting. Webber making ridiculous noises and tossing his dried fruit around like a caricature of somebody sowing, Paula with her brisk professionalism all dissolved in misty-eyed fondness, himself an alien in this time and place, and these perfectly normal-appearing people behaving like orang-utans with their fur shaved off. He started to laugh and then thought better of it. Once started, he might not be able to stop.

"Let them get used to you," said Webber softly.

Paula obviously had been here before. She had begun to make noises too, a modified hooting more like a pigeon's call. Kieran just stood still. The people moved in around them, sniffing, touching. There was no conversation, no laughing or giggling even among the little girls. A particularly beautiful young woman stood just behind the chief, watching the strangers with big yellow cat-eyes. Kieran took her to be the man's daughter. He smiled at her. She continued to stare, deadpan and blank-eyed, with no answering flicker of a smile. It was as though she had never seen one before. Kieran shivered. All this silence and unresponsiveness became eerie.

"I'm happy to tell you," he murmured to Paula, "that I don't think much of your little pets?"

She could not allow herself to be sharply angry. She only said, in a whisper, "They are not pets, they are not animals. They—"

She broke off. Something had come over the naked people. Every head had lifted, every eye had turned away from the strangers. They were listening. Even the littlest ones were still.

Kieran could not hear anything except the wind in the trees.

"What—?" he started to ask.

Webber made an imperative gesture for silence. The tableau held for a brief second longer. Then the brown-haired man who seemed to be the leader made a short harsh noise. The people turned and vanished into the trees.

"The Sakae," Webber said. "Get out of sight." He ran toward the flitter. Paula grabbed Kieran's sleeve and pushed him toward the trees.

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"What's going on?" he demanded as he ran.

"Their ears are better than ours. There's a patrol ship coming, I think."

THE shadows took them in, orange-and-gold-splashed shadows under strange trees. Kieran looked back. Webber had been inside the flitter. Now he tumbled out of the hatch and ran toward them. Behind him the hatch closed and the flitter stirred and then took off all by itself, humming.

"They'll follow it for a while," Webber panted. "It may give us a chance to get away." He and Paula started after the running people.

Kieran balked. "I don't know why I'm running away from anybody."

Webber pulled out a snub-nosed instrument that looked enough like a gun to be very convincing. He pointed it at Kieran's middle.

"Reason one," he said. "If the Sakae catch Paula and me here we're in very big trouble. Reason two—this is a closed area, and you're with us, so *you* will be in very big trouble." He looked coldly at Kieran. "The first reason is the one that interests me most."

Kieran shrugged. "Well, now I know." He ran.

Only then did he hear the low heavy thrumming in the sky.

6.

THE sound came rumbling very swiftly toward them. It was a completely different sound from the humming of the flitter, and it seemed to Kieran to hold a note of menace. He stopped in a small clearing where he might see up through the trees. He wanted a look at this ship or flier or whatever it was that had been built and was flown by non-humans.

But Webber shoved him roughly on into a clump of squat trees that were the color of sherry wine, with flat thick leaves.

"Don't move," he said.

Paula was hugging a tree beside him. She nodded to him to do as Webber said.

"They have very powerful scanners." She pointed with her chin. "Look. They've learned."

The harsh warning barks of the men sounded faintly, then were hushed. Nothing moved, except by the natural motion of the wind. The people crouched among the trees, so still that Kieran would not have seen them if he had not known they were there.

The patrol craft roared past, cranking up speed as it went. Webber grinned. "They'll be a couple of hours at least, overhauling and examining the flitter. By that time it'll be dark,

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and by morning we'll be in the mountains."

The people were already moving. They headed upstream, going at a steady, shuffling trot. Three of the women, Kieran noticed, had babies in their arms. The older children ran beside their mothers. Two of the men and several of the women were white-haired. They ran also.

"Do you like to see them run?" asked Paula, with a sharp note of passion in her voice. "Does it look good to you?"

"No," said Kieran, frowning. He looked in the direction in which the sound of the patrol craft was vanishing.

"Move along," Webber said. "They'll leave us far enough behind as it is."

KIERAN followed the naked people through the woods, beside the tawny river. Paula and Webber jogged beside him. The shadows were long now, reaching out across the water.

Paula kept glancing at him anxiously, as though to detect any sign of weakness on his part. "You're doing fine," she said. "You should. Your body was brought back to normal strength and tone, before you ever were awakened."

"They'll slow down when it's dark, anyway," said Webber.

The old people and the little children ran strongly.

"Is their village there?" Kieran asked, indicating the distant mountains.

"They don't live in villages," Paula said. "But the mountains are safer. More places to hide."

"You said this was a closed area. What is it, a hunting preserve?"

"The Sakae don't hunt them any more."

"But they used to?"

"Well," Webber said, "a long time ago. Not for food, the Sakae are vegetarians, but—"

"But," said Paula, "they were the dominant race, and the people were simply beasts of the field. When they competed for land and food the people were hunted down or driven out." She swung an expressive hand toward the landscape beyond the trees. "Why do you think they live in this desert, scraping a miserable existence along the watercourses? It's land the Sakae didn't want. Now, of course, they have no objection to setting it aside as a sort of game preserve. The humans are protected, the Sakae tell us. They're living their natural life in their natural environment, and when we demand that a program be—"

She was out of breath and had to stop, panting. Webber finished for her.

"We want them taught, lifted out of this naked savagery. The Sakae say it's impossible."

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"Is it true?" asked Kiernan.

"No," said Paula fiercely. "It's a matter of pride. They want to keep their dominance, so they simply won't admit that the people are anything more than animals, and they won't give them a chance to be anything more."

There was no more talking after that, but even so the three outlanders grew more and more winded and the people gained on them. The sun went down in a blaze of blood-orange light that tinted the trees in even more impossible colors and set the river briefly on fire. Then night came, and just after the darkness shut down the patrol craft returned, beating up along the winding river bed. Kieran froze under the black trees and the hair lifted on his skin. For the first time he felt like a hunted thing. For the first time he felt a personal anger.

The patrol craft drummed away and vanished. "They won't come back until daylight," Webber said.

HE handed out little flat packets of concentrated food from his pockets. They munched as they walked. Nobody said anything. The wind, which had dropped at sundown, picked up from a different quarter and began to blow again. It got cold. After a while they caught up with the people, who had stopped to rest and eat. The babies and old people for whom Kieran had felt a worried pity were in much better shape than he. He drank from the river and then sat down. Paula and Webber sat beside him, on the ground. The wind blew hard from the desert, dry and chill. The trees thrashed overhead. Against the pale glimmer of the water Kieran could see naked bodies moving along the river's edge, wading, bending, grubbing in the mud. Apparently they found things, for he could see that they were eating. Somewhere close by other people were stripping fruit or nuts from the trees. A man picked up a stone and pounded something with a cracking noise, then dropped the stone again. They moved easily in the dark, as though they were used to it. Kieran recognized the leader's yellow-eyed daughter, her beautiful slender height outlined against the pale-gleaming water. She stood up to her ankles in the soft mud, holding something tight in her two hands, eating.

The sweat dried on Kieran. He began to shiver.

"You're sure that patrol ship won't come back?" he asked.

"Not until they can see what they're looking for."

"Then I guess it's safe." He began to scramble around, feeling for dried sticks.

"What are you doing?"

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"Getting some firewood."

"No." Paula was beside him in an instant, her hand on his arm, "No, you mustn't do that."

"But Webber said—"

"It isn't the patrol ship, Kieran. It's the people. They—"

"They what?"

"I told you they were low on the social scale. This is one of the basic things they have to be taught. Right now they still regard fire as a danger, something to run from."

"I see," Kieran said, and let the kindling fall. "Very well, if I can't have a fire, I'll have you. Your body will warm me." He pulled her into his arms.

SHE gasped, more in astonishment, he thought, than alarm. "What are you talking about?"

"That's a line from an old movie. From a number of old movies, in fact. Not bad, eh?"

He held her tight. She was definitely female. After a moment he pushed her away.

"That was a mistake. I want to be able to go on disliking you without any qualifying considerations."

She laughed, a curiously flat little sound. "Was everybody crazy in your day?" she asked. And then, "Reed—"

It was the first time she had used his given name. "What?"

"When they threw the stones, and we got back into the flitter, you pushed me ahead of you. You were guarding me. Why?"

He stared at her, or rather at the pale blur of her standing close to him. "Well, it's always been sort of the custom for the men to— But now that I think of it, Webber didn't bother."

"No," said Paula. "Back in your day women were still taking advantage of the dual standard —demanding complete equality with men but clinging to their special status. We've got beyond that."

"Do you like it? Beyond, I mean."

"Yes," she said. "It was good of you to do that, but—"

Webber said, "They're moving again. Come on."

The people walked this time, strung out in a long line between the trees and the water, where the light was a little better and the way more open. The three outlanders tagged behind, clumsy in their boots and clothing. The long hair of the people blew in the wind and their bare feet padded softly, light and swift.

Kieran looked up at the sky. The trees obscured much of it so that all he could see was some scattered stars overhead. But he thought that somewhere a moon was rising.

He asked Paula and she said, "Wait. You'll see."

Night and the river rolled be-

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hind them. The moonlight became brighter, but it was not at all like the moonlight Kieran remembered from long ago and far away. That had had a cold tranquility to it, but this light was neither cold nor tranquil. It seemed somehow to shift color, too, which made it even less adequate for seeing than the white moonlight he was used to. Sometimes as it filtered through the trees it seemed ice-green, and again it was reddish or amber, or blue.

They came to a place where the river made a wide bend and they cut across it, clear of the trees. Paula touched Kieran's arm and pointed. "Look."

Kieran looked, and then he stopped still. The light was not moonlight, and its source was not a moon. It was a globular cluster of stars, hung in the sky like a swarm of fiery bees, a burning and pulsing of many colors, diamond-white and gold, green and crimson, peacock blue and smoky umber. Kieran stared, and beside him Paula murmured, "I've been on a lot of planets, but none of them have anything like this."

The people moved swiftly on, paying no attention at all to the sky.

Reluctantly Kieran followed them into the obscuring woods. He kept looking at the open sky above the river, waiting for the cluster to rise high so he could see it.

It was some time after this, but before the cluster rose clear of the trees, that Kieran got the feeling that something, or someone, was following them.

7.

HE had stopped to catch his breath and shake an accumulation of sand out of his boots. He was leaning against a tree with his back to the wind, which meant that he was facing their back-trail, and he thought he saw a shadow move where there was nothing to cast a shadow. He straightened up with the little trip-hammers of alarm beating all over him, but he could see nothing more. He thought he might have been mistaken. Just the same, he ran to catch up with the others.

The people were moving steadily. Kieran knew that their senses were far keener than his, and they were obviously not aware of any danger other than the basic one of the Sakae. He decided that he must have been seeing things.

But an uneasiness persisted. He dropped behind again, this time on purpose, after they had passed a clearing. He stayed hidden behind a tree-trunk and watched. The cluster-light was bright now but very confusing

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to the eye. He heard a rustling that he did not think was wind, and he thought that something started to cross the clearing and then stopped, as though it had caught his scent.

Then he thought that he heard rustlings at both sides of the clearing, stealthy sounds of stalking that closed in toward him. Only the wind, he told himself, but again he turned to run. This time he met Paula, coming back to look for him.

"Reed, are you all right?" she asked. He caught her arm and pulled her around and made her run. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"I don't know." He hurried with her until he could see Webber ahead, and beyond him the bare backs and blowing hair of the people. "Listen," he said, "are there any predators here?"

"Yes," Paula said, and Webber turned sharply around.

"Have you seen something?"

"I don't know. I thought I did. I'm not sure."

"Where?"

"Behind us."

Webber made the harsh barking danger call, and the people stopped. Webber stood looking back the way they had come. The women caught the children and the men fell back to where Webber stood. They looked and listened, sniffing the air. Kieran listened too, but now he did not hear any rustlings except the high thrashing of the branches. Nothing stirred visibly and the wind would carry away any warning scent.

The men turned away. The people moved on again. Webber shrugged.

"You must have been mistaken, Kieran."

"Maybe. Or maybe they just can't think beyond the elementary. If they don't smell it, it isn't there. If something is after us it's coming up-wind, the way any hunting animal works. A couple of the men ought to circle around and—"

"Come on," said Webber wearily.

THEY followed the people beside the river. The cluster was high now, a hive of suns reflected in the flowing water, a kaleidoscopic rippling of colors.

Now the women were carrying the smaller children. The ones too large to be carried were lagging behind a little. So were the aged. Not much, yet. Kieran, conscious that he was weaker than the weakest of these, looked ahead at the dim bulk of the mountains and thought that they ought to be able to make it. He was not at all sure that he would.

The river made another bend. The trail lay across the bend, clear of the trees. It was a wide

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bend, perhaps two miles across the neck. Ahead, where the trail joined the river again, there was a rocky hill. Something about the outlines of the hill seemed wrong to Kieran, but it was too far away to be sure of anything. Overhead the cluster burned gloriously. The people set out across the sand.

Webber looked back. "You see?" he said. "Nothing."

They went on. Kieran was beginning to feel very tired now, all the artificial strength that had been pumped into him before his awakening was running out. Webber and Paula walked with their heads down, striding determinedly but without joy.

"What do you think now?" she asked Kieran. "Is this any way for humans to live?"

The ragged line of women and children moved ahead of them, with the men in the lead. It was not natural, Kieran thought, for children to be able to travel so far, and then he remembered that the young of non-predacious species have to be strong and fleet at an early age.

Suddenly one of the women made a harsh, shrill cry.

Kieran looked where she was looking, off to the left, to the river and the curving line of trees. A large black shadow slipped across the sand. He looked behind him. There were other shadows, coming with long easy bounds out of the trees, fanning out in a shallow crescent. They reminded Kieran of some animal he had once seen in a zoo, a partly catlike, partly doglike beast, a cheetah he thought it had been called, only the cheetah was spotted like a leopard and these creatures were black, with stiff, upstanding ears. They bayed, and the coursing began.

"Nothing," said Kieran bitterly. "I count seven."

Webber said, "My God, I—"

THE people ran. They tried to break back to the river and the trees that could be climbed to safety, but the hunters turned them. Then they fled blindly forward, toward the hill. They ran with all their strength, making no sound. Kieran and Webber ran with them, with Paula between them. Webber seemed absolutely appalled.

"Where's that gun you had?" Kieran panted.

"It's not a gun, only a short-range shocker," he said. "It wouldn't stop these things. Look at them!"

They bounded, sporting around them, howling with a sound like laughter. They were as large as leopards and their eyes glowed in the cluster-light. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, as though hunting was the most delightful game in the world. One of them ran up

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to within two feet of Kieran and snapped at him with its great jaws, dodging agilely when he raised his arm. They drove the people, faster and faster. At first the men had formed around the women and children. But the formation began to disintegrate as the weaker ones dropped behind, and no attempt was made to keep it. Panic was stronger than instinct now. Kieran looked ahead. "If we can make it to that hill—"

Paula screamed and he stumbled over a child, a girl about five, crawling on her hands and knees. He picked her up. She bit and thrashed and tore at him, her bare little body hard as whalebone and slippery with sweat. He could not hold onto her. She kicked herself free of his hands and rushed wildly out of reach, and one of the black hunters pounced in and bore her away, shrieking thinly like a fledgling bird in the jaws of a cat.

"Oh my God," said Paula, and covered her head with her arms, trying to shut out sight and sound. He caught her and said harshly, "Don't faint, because I can't carry you." The child's mother, whichever of the women it might have been, did not look back.

An old woman who strayed aside was pulled down and dragged off, and then one of the white-haired men. The hill was closer. Kieran saw now what was wrong with it. Part of it was a building. He was too tired and too sick to be interested, except as it offered a refuge. He spoke to Webber, with great difficulty because he was winded. And then he realized that Webber wasn't there.

WEBBER had stumbled and fallen. He had started to get up, but the hunters were on him. He was on his hands and knees facing them, screaming at them to get away from him. He had, obviously, had little or no experience with raw violence. Kieran ran back to him, with Paula close behind.

"Use your gun!" he yelled. He was afraid of the black hunters, but he was full of rage and the rage outweighed the fear. He yelled at them, cursing them. He hurled sand into their eyes, and one that was creeping up on Webber from the side he kicked. The creature drew off a little, not frightened but surprised. They were not used to this sort of thing from humans. "Your gun!" Kieran roared again, and Webber pulled the snub-nosed thing out of his pocket. He stood up and said unsteadily, "I told you, it's not a gun. It won't kill anything. I don't think—"

"Use it," said Kieran. "And get moving again. Slowly."

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They started to move, and then across the sky a great iron voice spoke like thunder. "Lie down," it said, "please. Lie down flat."

Kieran turned his head, startled. From the direction of the building on the hill a vehicle was speeding toward them.

"The Sakae," said Webber with what was almost a sob of relief. "Lie down."

As he did so, Kieran saw a pale flash shoot out from the vehicle and knock over a hunter still hanging on the flanks of the fleeing people. He hugged the sand. Something went whining and whistling over him, there was a thunk and a screech. It was repeated, and then the iron voice spoke again.

"You may get up now. Please remain where you are." The vehicle was much closer. They were bathed in sudden light. The voice said, "Mr. Webber, you are holding a weapon. Please drop it."

"It's only a little shocker," Webber said, plaintively. He dropped it.

The vehicle had wide tracks that threw up clouds of sand. It came clanking to a halt. Kieran, shading his eyes, thought he distinguished two creatures inside, a driver and a passenger.

THE passenger emerged, climbing with some difficulty over the steep step of the track, his tail rattling down behind him like a length of thick cable. Once on the ground he became quite agile, moving with a sort of oddly graceful prance on his powerful legs. He approached, his attention centered on Kieran. But he observed the amenities, placing one delicate hand on his breast and making a slight bow.

"Doctor Ray." His muzzle, shaped something like a duck's bill, nevertheless formed Paula's name tolerably well. "And you, I think, are Mr. Kieran."

Kieran said, "Yes." The star-cluster blazed overhead. The dead beasts lay behind him, the people with their flying hair had run on beyond his sight. He had been dead for a hundred years and now he was alive again. Now he was standing on alien soil, facing an alien form of life, communicating with it, and he was so dog-tired and every sensory nerve was so thoroughly flayed that he had nothing left to react with. He simply looked at the Saka as he might have looked at a fence-post, and said, "Yes."

The Saka made his formal little bow again. "I am Bregg." He shook his head. "I'm glad I was able to reach you in time. You people don't seem to have any notion of the amount of trouble you make for us—"

Paula, who had not spoken since the child was carried off,

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suddenly screamed at Bregg, "Murderer!"

She sprang at him, striking him in blind hysteria.

8.

BREGG sighed. He caught Paula in those fine small hands that seemed to have amazing strength and held her, at arm's length. "Doctor Ray," he said. He shook her. "Doctor Ray." She stopped screaming. "I don't wish to administer a sedative because then you will say that I drugged you. But I will if I must."

Kieran said, "I'll keep her quiet."

He took her from Bregg. She collapsed against him and began to cry. "Murderers," she whispered. "That little girl, those old people—"

Webber said, "You could exterminate those beasts. You don't have to let them hunt the people like that. It's—it's—"

"Unhuman is the word you want," said Bregg. His voice was exceedingly weary. "Please get into the car."

They climbed in. The car churned around and sped back toward the building. Paula shivered, and Kieran held her in his arms. Webber said after a moment or two, "How did you happen to be here, Bregg?"

"When we caught the flitter and found it empty, it was obvious that you were with the people, and it became imperative to find you before you came to harm. I remembered that the trail ran close by this old outpost building, so I had the patrol ship drop us here with an emergency vehicle.

Kieran said, "You knew the people were coming this way?"

"Of course." Bregg sounded surprised. "They migrate every year at the beginning of the dry season. How do you suppose Webber found them so easily?"

Kieran looked at Webber. He asked, "Then they weren't running from the Sakae?"

"Of course they were," Paula said. "You saw them yourself, cowering under the trees when the ship went over."

"The patrol ships frighten them," Bregg said. "Sometimes to the point of stampeding them, which is why we use them only in emergencies. The people do not connect the ships with us."

"That," said Paula flatly, "is a lie."

Bregg sighed. "Enthusiasts always believe what they want to believe. Come and see for yourself."

She straightened up. "What have you done to them?"

"We've caught them in a trap," said Bregg, "and we are presently going to stick needles into them—a procedure necessi-

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tated by your presence, Doctor Ray. They're highly susceptible to imported viruses, as you should remember—one of your little parties of do-gooders succeeded in wiping out a whole band of them not too many years ago. So—inoculations and quarantine."

LIGHTS had blazed up in the area near the building. The car sped toward them.

Kieran said slowly, "Why don't you just exterminate the hunters and have done with them?"

"In your day, Mr. Kieran—yes, I've heard all about you—in your day, did you on Earth exterminate the predators so that their natural prey might live more happily?"

Bregg's long muzzle and sloping skull were profiled against the lights.

"No," said Kieran, "we didn't. But in that case, they were all animals."

"Exactly," said Bregg. "No, wait, Doctor Ray. Spare me the lecture. I can give you a much better reason than that, one even you can't quarrel with. It's a matter of ecology. The number of humans destroyed by these predators annually is negligible but they do themselves destroy an enormous number of small creatures with which the humans compete for their food. If we exterminated the hunters the small animals would multiply so rapidly that the humans would starve to death."

The car stopped beside the hill, at the edge of the lighted area. A sort of makeshift corral of wire fencing had been set up, with wide wings to funnel the people into the enclosure, where a gate was shut on them. Two Sakae were mounting guard as the party from the car approached the corral. Inside the fence Kieran could see the people, flopped around in positions of exhaustion. They did not seem to be afraid now. A few of them were drinking from a supply of water provided for them. There was food scattered for them on the ground.

Bregg said something in his own language to one of the guards, who looked surprised and questioned him, then departed, springing strongly on his powerful legs. "Wait," said Bregg.

They waited, and in a moment or two the guard came back leading one of the black hunting beasts on a chain. It was a female, somewhat smaller than the ones Kieran had fought with, and having a slash of white on the throat and chest. She howled and sprang up on Bregg, butting her great head into his shoulder, wriggling with delight. He petted her, talking to her, and

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she laughed dog-like and licked his cheek.

"They domesticate well," he said. "We've had a tame breed for centuries."

HE moved a little closer to the corral, holding tight to the animal's chain. Suddenly she became aware of the people. Instantly the good-natured pet turned into a snarling fury. She reared on her hind legs and screamed, and inside the corral the people roused up. They were not frightened now. They spat and chattered, clawing up sand and pebbles and bits of food to throw through the fence. Bregg handed the chain to the guard, who hauled the animal away by main force.

Paula said coldly, "If your point was that the people are not kind to animals, my answer is that you can hardly blame them."

"A year ago," Bregg said, "some of the people got hold of her two young ones. They were torn to pieces before they could be saved, and she saw it. I can't blame her, either."

He went on to the gate and opened it and went inside. The people drew back from him. They spat at him, too, and pelted him with food and pebbles. He spoke to them, sternly, in the tone of one speaking to unruly dogs, and he spoke words, in his own tongue. The people began to shuffle about uneasily. They stopped throwing things. He stood waiting.

The yellow-eyed girl came sidling forward and rubbed herself against his thigh, head, shoulder and flank. He reached down and stroked her, and she whimpered with pleasure and arched her back.

"Oh, for God's sake," said Kieran, "let's get out of here."

LATER, they sat wearily on fallen blocks of cement inside a dusty, shadowy room of the old building. Only a hand-lamp dispelled the gloom, and the wind whispered coldly, and Bregg walked to and fro in his curious prance as he talked.

"It will be a little while before the necessary medical team can be picked up and brought here," he said. "We shall have to wait."

"And then?" asked Kieran.

"First to—" Bregg used a word that undoubtedly named a city of the Sakae but that meant nothing to Kieran, "—and then to Altair Two. This, of course, is a council matter."

He stopped and looked with bright, shrewd eyes at Kieran. "You are quite the sensation already, Mr. Kieran. The whole community of starworlds is already aware of the illegal resuscitation of one of the pioneer spacemen, and of course there is great interest." He paused.

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"You, yourself, have done nothing unlawful. You cannot very well be sent back to sleep, and undoubtedly the council will want to hear you. I am curious as to what you will say."

"About Sako?" said Kieran. "About—them?" He made a gesture toward a window through which the wind brought the sound of stirring, of the gruntings and whufflings of the corralled people.

"Yes. About them."

"I'll tell you how I feel," Kieran said flatly. He saw Paula and Webber lean forward in the shadows. "I'm a human man. The people out there may be savage, low as the beasts, good for nothing the way they are—but they're human. You Sakae may be intelligent, civilized, reasonable, but you're not human. When I see you ordering them around like beasts, I want to kill you. That's how I feel."

Bregg did not change his bearing, but he made a small sound that was almost a sigh.

"Yes," he said. "I feared it would be so. A man of your times—a man from a world where humans were all-dominant—would feel that way." He turned and looked at Paula and Webber. "It appears that your scheme, to this extent, was successful."

"No, I wouldn't say that," said Kieran.

Paula stood up. "But you just told us how you feel—"

"And it's the truth," said Kieran. "But there's something else." He looked thoughtfully at her. "It was a good idea. It was bound to work—a man of my time was bound to feel just this way you wanted him to feel, and would go away from here crying your party slogans and believing them. But you overlooked something—"

He paused, looking out the window into the sky, at the faint vari-colored radiance of the cluster.

YOU overlooked the fact that when you awoke me, I would no longer be a man of my own time—or of any time. I was in darkness for a hundred years—with the stars my brothers, and no man touching me. Maybe that chills a man's feelings, maybe something deep in his mind lives and has time to think. I've told you how I feel, yes. But I haven't told you what I think—"

He stopped again, then said, "The people out there in the corral have my form, and my instinctive loyalty is to them. But instinct isn't enough. It would have kept us in the mud of Earth forever, if it could. Reason took us out to the wider universe. Instinct tells me that those out there are my people. Reason tells me that you—" he looked at

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Bregg, "—who are abhorrent to me, who would make my skin creep if I touched you, you who go by reason—that you are my real people. Instinct made a hell of Earth for millennia—I say we ought to leave it behind us there in the mud and not let it make a hell of the stars. For you'll run into this same problem over and over again as you go out into the wider universe, and the old parchial human loyalties must be altered, to solve it."

He looked at Paula and said, "I'm sorry, but if anyone asks me, that is what I'll say."

"I'm sorry, too," she said, rage and dejection ringing in her voice. "Sorry we woke you. I hope I never see you again."

Kieran shrugged. "After all, you did wake me. You're responsible for me. Here I am, facing a whole new universe, and I'll need you." He went over and patted her shoulder.

"Damn you," she said. But she did not move away from him.

THE END

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Relentlessly, a narrative as old as time drives forward to a climax as old as man—and points a finger as grim as Death.

the BEGINNING

By HENRY HASSE

Illustrated by FINLAY

IN the purely cerebral sense, there was no particular point-of-sequence at which Gral could have been said to Know. The very causality of his existence was a succession of brute obedience to brute awareness, for it was only thus that one survived. There was the *danger-sense* on those days when the great-toothed cats roamed the valley, and the males-who-will-bring remained huddled and sullen in the caves above the great ledge;

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there was the *hunger-sense* when provender was low, and Gor-wah drove them out with grunts and gibes to hunt the wild-dogs and lizards and lesser beasts; and not infrequently there was the other sense, the *not-hunger*, when the bring had been exceptional and there was somnolence after the gorging.

Gral could not remember when he had experienced the latter, for it was the dictate of Gor-wah, the Old One, that who did not bring did not eat—not until the others had gorged. Gral was small, and weakest of all the males. Not often did he bring. *Once* on a spurious moment he had scaled the valley-rim. and came out upon the huge plain where it was rumored the little three-toed horses roamed. And he had seen them, he had seen them! He pursued, armed only with blunt shaft and a few of the throw-stones such as Otah used; but he was less swift than the tiny horses, and his throw-stones fell wide, and it was rumored that here roamed the long-tusked shaggy ones that were larger than the very caves . . . trembling, Gral had retraced his way, to arrive at the ledge and meekly await Gor-wah's word that he could partake of the sinews that night.

. . . *Point of sequence. Causality in action. An atom is dissected, a belly rumbles in hunger, a star blooms into brief nova; a bird wheels in futile escape, an ice-flow impacts, an equation is expressed in awesome mushrooming shape. These are multitudinous, apocalyptic. They are timeless and equal. These are things whereby suns wheel or blossom or die, a tribe vanishes, a civilization climbs or a world decays.*

Or an earlier sun, hot and soft-stroking against leaves. Or a Pleistocene man, smallest of all the males, whose supine acceptance had devolved into laziness . . .

Gral would not have called it laziness; his crude synaptics could not have contained the thought, much less given it relevance. Even later—as Gral-the-Bringer—his only point of relevance was to the Place where the great thing happened.

The Place was a small rocky cleft above the river, not easily accessible . . . Gral found it one day because he dearly loved to climb, though all to be found here were the lizards, stringy and without substance. But this day he found more. It was *warmth*, a warmth immeasurably more satisfying than the caves-above-the-ledge. Here for perhaps an hour the late sun stroked directly in, soft and containing, setting the narrow walls aglow with bright-brushed patterns.

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To Gral it was an hour apart. He gathered leaves and placed them here, and here he paused in the lateness of each day though his bring was frugal and his belly would rumble that night. But to *that* he was accustomed, and this was pleasurable.

IT was the time of the thaw. Gral huddled in his Place and welcomed the stroking warmth. He was weary, his forage had been fruitless, his throw-stones wasted . . . would he never master them as Otah and the others? He had confronted a wild-dog and pinned it snarling against rock, he had employed his shaft and got it fairly into flesh, only to have the beast slip off the smooth point and escape. Smooth points—they were useless! Briefly, his mind groped with that but could not sustain it.

So Gral burrowed into the leaves, his anger diminished as he watched with drowsy delight the sun-patterns stroking. And his eyes must have closed, half closed . . .

It was no snarl that brought him back—it was a tread, soft-shod and cautious, very close. The snarl came an instant later, deep-throated with anger and meaning.

Another had found this Place, this warmth, these leaves that were fine for burrowing. Gral came erect and stared into the visage of Obe the Great Bear; just six feet away he saw the great head that swayed with deceptive gentleness, the amber eyes burning, the twinned mountainous muscle of shoulders . . . and in that quick moment Gral saw something else. Obe stood directly astride the pointed shaft which Gral had left too far distant.

Gral did not breathe. He did not move. Only his hand crept slowly, but already he knew his throw-stones were gone. Once more Obe snarled, and Gral saw those great shoulder muscles slide. His hand encountered the wall, groped desperately; then his fingers found something—a stick, a root, some gnarled thing that protruded . . .

In one rearing flow of motion, Obe launched out in a mighty reach. Gral caught part of that sweeping blow; stunned, he managed to gain footing, and now both his hands were on the protruding object. He wrenched and the thing came free, seeming strange and heavy in his hands. Obe was upon him again, the great paws ready to crush . . . pure terror sent Gral stumbling back, but it was a different instinct that brought his arms once up and then down in a great arc . . .

Once only. He felt a wondrous impact that jarred him to the

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shoulders—and then it was a miracle. Obe was no longer upon him. Obe lay half sprawled, roaring with rage, and from Obe's massive head came the crimson life-stuff!

Gral did not question. Avoiding the destructive paws, he leaped in and away, and then in, all the while employing the thing in his hand until Obe's life-stuff had run its course in crimson ruin.

Acceptance came slowly, as Gral sagged in weariness against the wall. He could not believe this thing! Timorously, he approached the great carcass and prodded with his foot. Then he accepted.

Now things were happening inside him—a great turmoil, a throbbing within his chest. Gral straightened; he brought his arms quickly up and around, and the thing-that-slew felt wondrous in the arc. Even better than the throw-stones! It was like—he struggled for the meaning—like an extension of one's self! One threw the stone and yet retained it!

But alas, it was not a stone at all, Gral discovered. He placed the gnarled thing in sunlight and crouched to survey it. This thing-that-slew was but a length of rotting root, frozen at the end with clay and encrusted ice. And already the ice was shattered. The sun did the rest, as Gral watched in despair; soon there was only soft melting mud and a gnarled stick that would never slay again.

For a long time Gral crouched there, trying to understand. Dimly he perceived, but his mind would not reach. He scowled angrily and flung the useless stick away. There was a thing inside him he did not like, a strange new thing that gnawed and nagged and brought anger again.

It was anger at being robbed of a priceless thing—but the gnawing went deeper.

Wearily, he rose. He began his trek back to the great ledge, to make announcement that his bring this day would be Obe.

OTAH came, and Lak and one other, and together they brought Obe back. No one made remark on the slaying; it was enough that Obe was here! And when Gral came forward at the gorging to take the bringer's share, he merely took and retired, disdaining the great show of prowess and exaggeration which the others used to demonstrate their kill. But he saw that Gor-wah, the Old One, was pleased. Even Otah the Thrower-of-Stones looked at him with envy; it was not often they had Obe the Great Bear; only twice before had it happened, and both times it was Otah who brought.

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Gral gorged voluptuously that night. This too was new to his experience, and this he liked. But newer still was the thing he did not like, the thing that continued to gnaw and nag and would not let him sleep.

And next morning, with the valley still gray and murky before the dawn and damp with bitter cold, Gral was gone in advance of the others. He clambered down to the river and there he pursued his way—far along toward the place where it widened into shallows. No thought of bringing today! Instead he searched. He searched the rocky shallows as the sun came shafting, and he was still searching later as it climbed high.

He found the place at last, where the stones were plentiful and of proper size. There he paused; the thing was still angry and prodding within him; Gral could not have known that this "thing-that-prodded" was not anger but a churning impatience, a burning nameless need—that he was in very truth a prototype, the first in the realm of pure research!

But he applied it, knowing remotely what he must do. It was long; it was irksome; he ached all through with the effort but still he persisted. Until at last, from all the stones in the shallows, he had gathered a dozen that pleased him.

These he seized eagerly. He spread them out; he examined; he grunted and grimaced and paused in perplexity. It was difficult to choose when each might do! But he chose, weighing each in his hand before discarding, until finally *one* remained.

He grunted his pleasure, knowing purpose now. The vines! Again he selected carefully. *Tight*, said the thing-that-prodded, *it must be tight or you will have only a throw-stone.*

And so began the long task of arranging stone to shaft, as he brought the vine round and round again. It was crude; his fingers were clumsy and unaccustomed; the vine tangled and tore, and there was no way of fastening. But with each failure he found new ways, until at last it was done.

It was done! A thing of extended strength and weight, at once so wondrous that Gral could only place it before him and stare. He felt a pulsing at his throat, his thoughts went leaping. Obe the Great Bear! Now he could bring Obe many times! Even Otah the Thrower-of-Stones would be in awe!

Gral lifted the thing of his creation . . . and just a little way distant, his glance caught the bole of a tree. *Now this will be Obe the Great Bear* . . . then Gral leapt forward, arm outflung in the arc he remembered.

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Truly and without effort the weight went to the mark. It made impact that jarred him from arm to shoulder, but this he did not mind because his weapon's edge brought a great gaping wound to the weathered bole.

. . . *the first sound of isolate words across a wire. The initial shock of mushroom-shape above an atoll. The fierce clutch of a weighted shaft newly fashioned . . . man stands always* FOR A MOMENT *in awe of what man has wrought.*

For a moment only. And so Gral stood stark in his moment of awe, truly frightened as he visioned what such a blow might have done to Obe. But Gral was truly man, truly prototype; for the time of one deep breath he felt it, then awe and fright were gone as he exulted.

Once more he brought the shaft *up* in smooth swing and *down* in the arc . . .

Alas for Gral—alas for research. Alas for all the effort and application and the prodding-thing within. It was Gral's destiny yet to know that a mere day's effort was only the beginning.

For his second mighty swing did not reach the bole-bark. It reached nothing but air. He felt a sudden lightness as the stone fled from shaft, and he was left holding a stick trailing vines at the end.

Undaunted, he tried again, and again it happened—the stone went plummeting. A third time he tried, and a fourth. He chose the more pliant vines and strove to make them stay, sought a new way to fasten. The stone would not stay.

Gral mourned, and from the mourning came anger and then a bitterness that rose to blind him. For the rest of that day he tried—he could not have counted the times. A factor was missing—dimly he knew that. The sun was dull red along the valley when he desisted; his hands were raw and bleeding, and seeing that, a scund rose in his throat like grating gravel.

Grimly, he buried his stone there beneath the bole and made his way back to the great ledge. His share of Obe would last yet a day or two. The thought of food was only fleeting, because the anger was still inside him, larger now, demanding now . . . that thing-that-prodded.

OBE was gone at last, both Gral's share and all the rest. Three days were gone and Gral did not try to bring again. But each day he went from the ledge in advance of the others, he went in a hunger he did not heed—to the place of the buried stone.

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On the third day he thought that Otah followed, keeping discreetly behind; but he could not be sure. This was not Otah's usual direction. And later, on the far shore across the shallows he saw one of Kurho's tribe from Far End. It was not often that Kurho's people foraged this far, and Gral could not say how long the man must have stood there bold and brazen. When next he looked up, the fellow was gone.

Ordinarily he would have reported this to Gor-way, but the incident was soon forgotten. He continued doggedly with shaft and stone. It was something wild and febrile that drove him now, and he could not have wondered at his own incredible quixotism —he was a million years removed from that! But inevitably his synapses took hold, the neuronic links grooved, and to Gral one thought emerged: *the vines would never do.*

And so he came to know where the missing factor lay. He knew it dully and was helpless.

More than helpless, he was hungry. It came with a great gnawing need. On the fifth day it was *Otah* who noticed, and more out of contempt than pity tossed him the remnants of a wild-dog he had brought: the portion was little more than stripped bones and sinew, but Gral accepted without question, crawled to his place on the ledge and partially assuaged his hunger . . .

The ways of discovery are most wondrous—yet who will dare to say they take precedence over the wondrous ways of the stomach? And the ways are ironic; is it not conceivable that the two should align in devious fruition? For Gral found answer, not in his groping hands, but tangled about his clumsy feet!

The sun came high and hot. Gral emerged from his sleep-place on the ledge, faint and hungry but knowing he must try yet again. He took a step, his feet tangled, and growling deep he reached down and tore at a tough twining substance.

Sinews. Sinews stripped bare by his own hunger, all that Otah and others had tossed him these past days; they were taut and clinging now, unresilient, like the vines of the young trees and yet strangely unlike.

Unlike! Gral stared, as his throat went pulsing. He reached out and touched; one had twined about a rock, was now so fast that his fingers could not cause it to move. For a long time he crouched, perplexed, growling deep as his fingers explored. He glanced up at the sun, and then back, and with that glance two things came together with searing shock . . .

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For the very first time, man—a Pleistocene man—had made a clear cerebral distinction of cause and effect.

Gral arose. There was a wild new urgency. Quickly he searched and he found, across all the great ledge, sinews from the gorging which the sun had not yet touched. Some among the tribe stared with immobile contempt, thinking Gral the scavenger was yet hungry. But Gral gathered quickly, and departed, and was soon at the far place by the great bole, where he retrieved his stone and set feverishly to work.

Indeed it was not like the vines! It was easy now, but he was doubly thorough; he made his fingers be strong as he followed the pattern he knew so well. The sinews held, they held! His part done at last, he went out from the trees and placed his shaft where the sun's hot stroke could reach.

And this was perhaps hardest of all—the waiting. Most of that day he crouched and waited and watched, as the sun's work was done; that great bright orb, his ally; he had known times when it was beneficent and times when it was cruel, but now in his need Gral's thoughts were kindly.

Soon it became as if his own kind thoughts and the sun's hot strength were one. The thing-that-prodded now was different, now it outpoured, gracious to meet his need. He could not have known that this was prayer! And so, by degree and small degree Gral saw the sinews grasp and tighten.

Not until the sun was low, at valley's Far End, did he dare reach out and take his shaft and put it to test. But already he knew! The stone held, and it held, and would continue to hold after many tries. He had fashioned a thing and it was wondrous—his own sole possession—a weapon beyond anything the valley-people had dreamed of—and it was his alone.

A stirring of vague alarm made him pause. He growled deep. The thing-that-prodded churned in a new way, a cunning way, and once again Gral was prototype. This thing must be kept secret! Not yet would he share—not until he became known as Gral-the-Bringer!

. . . he could not have known. Could not have known that this thing he wrought spelled at once Beginning and End: that no such shocking departure remains long sole-possessed, either shaft or fire or mushroom-shape: that with each great thing of man's devising comes question and doubt and challenge and often disaster . . .

Or knowing, would not have cared.

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So now he was known as Gral-the-Bringer! He went alone each day, taking throw-stones which he discarded in favor of his new weapon from its place of hiding. He brought the wild-dogs for a time, but soon he disdained them. Three times more he brought Obe the Great Bear, but would not demonstrate his method of kill. Sometimes he scaled the valley-rim to the great plain, where he slew the three-toed horses whose flesh was sweet and different.

And each time at the gorging Otah watched him—watched sometimes sullen and brooding, sometimes with secret knowing.

And then came a day when *Otah* brought Obe the Bear. Three times in as many days he brought Obe, and on the third time he brought back also the shaft-with-stone, bearing it boldly to make sure that Gral and all the others saw.

With half snarl and half wail, Gral leaped to seize it. Otah might have crushed him with a blow, but Otah waited, looking at him fully. Gral's snarl died in his throat. This was not the weapon he had hidden, but another! Otah had found and copied.

"See this!" Otah grunted. "I slew Obe with this!" And he demonstrated to all the tribe. He was still angry, facing Gral, but he gave credit. "*Gral* used it first. Gral is greatest among us! But if Gral can use, Otah can use—we will all use!"

He turned to Gor-wah the Old One, and said in the language of monosyllable and gesture: "We must have Council!"

There was Council, and the truth was out. Gral held back nothing in his telling. Gor-wah listened and nodded and grunted, his brow furrowed and he growled deep in his throat.

"A weapon of great magic," Gor-wah pronounced, and he prodded with his fingers at it, almost afraid to touch.

"Arh-h-h!" echoed the males. "A weapon of great magic!"

"Let us have many such," Otah repeated with growl and gesture. "The tribe of Gor-wah will be greatest in all the valley!"

Again Gor-wah grunted, shook his head slowly. "The tribe of Gor-wah seeks only food and peace. This we have. We do well without such a weapon."

"Arh-h," echoed the males. "We do well without."

Gral felt helpless, listening. All attention was now upon Otah and the Old One. "But we will use only for food and peace," Otah pursued sullenly. "Such was my meaning!"

Gor-wah rose, trembling. "Meaning? I will give you meaning. Kurho's tribe at Far End! Already they have taken the

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lesser tribes. Each year they come in bold insolence, and only the river separates; in time they mean to take the whole valley. Kurho has declared it!" He spread his hands. "Never again will we know peace, if Kurho learns the way of such a weapon!"

There was pause, a restless unease. And again it was Otah who growled boldly, touching the weapon: "Such is the reason for many of these. Let us make them, and none will dare to come!"

"None will dare!" echoed the Council. But there were both those who said it strong, and those who said in doubt.

Now it was plain that even Gor-wah was in doubt. He was old and he had known this time would come, the time when another took the tribe, and that one would be Otah. But now he stood straight and made pronouncement. "I say no! The risk is too great. You, Otah—and you, Gral—you will destroy this weapon. It must not be used again!"

OF course it was never done. Otah also knew that he must take the tribe, and they looked to him now. Soon Lok had the weapon, then Mai-ak and most of the others, as day by day Gral instructed them in the making. But they used with caution! Otah reminded them always of the Old One's words, though none of the Far End tribe had been seen near the river for many days now.

Until Mai-ak returned from a journey, to announce he had encountered one of Kurho's tribe. "We exchanged insults. I invited him to come close," Mai-ak explained with amusing gesture, "but the fellow would not. He saw my weapon! I think he would have given all his throwstones to possess it!"

Otah was not pleased. He would have admonished, except that Mai-ak told a story well; besides, Mai-ak was a great hunter.

But there came another such day, and then others. First Lok reported and than Mai-ak again. The reports became frequent. Kurho's men were forever near, watching in silence this new weapon in the hands of the Gor-wah tribe across the river.

And then Mai-ak brought a message . . . there had been another encounter, no insults this time but rather a sullen understanding. Kurho was aware of the new weapon; it made his own people uneasy and restless; such a thing at loose in the valley could only spell threat to all peoples! But, if it was to be, then what the tribe of Gor-wah devised Kurho's tribe would also devise. They would devise more and better!

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Otah listened, growled in anger. "Kurho says this? Kurho, who has boasted that he will take the whole valley?" Then he paused and considered sensibly. "Mai-ak, take answer. You will say that we go in peace. Say that never do we intend to cross the river. And say also"—Otah paused, groping—"say also that we shall be ready for any who do choose to cross!"

The Old One nodded approval, but no one saw; and no one saw the dark furrow of doubt like a shadow of doom across his face.

"Kurho speaks big," sneered a young one, new in Council. "We have heard it before, always it is Kurho's tribe who is greatest in every deed . . ." He spat in contempt.

Days were gone, endless days without incident. But the reports came in—a mere trickle at first, and then in great tide. Kurho's tribe had indeed devised. Their weapon had been observed! Dak returned one day in high excitement, stumbling across the ledge from a long day's journey.

"Kurho has devised better! We bring Obe the Bear, but they have now slain the great-toothed one. I saw it, I swear! They slew him easily!" He gasped for breath, then gained his feet and gave them eloquent gesture of what he had seen.

There could be no doubt. Kurho now had a weapon much more facile, more deadly.

Otah accepted grimly. Now it was he who must prove! He went to work at once, he and Gral, devising a weapon to meet the threat—more sharp-edged and deadly, of greater length and balance. It took days. And days more to seek out the place of the great-toothed ones. Not one but *three* were slain, and it was made certain the word reached Kurho.

But now Otah knew. He knew and was helpless. A frightful thing had been launched and there could be no turning; nothing now but the constant fear, the trap without end, the perilous thing above all their heads . . . and the waiting.

Kurho also waited. True, one thing remained to temper the distrust: sporadic communication had been established, a thing new and yet heavy with pretense, which again like a serpent at its tail spelled mutual distrust. But it was there, begrudging, and all the smaller tribes knew of it too—those scattered ones who were little more than clans. All the peoples of the valley watched and waited, aware of this thing between the two great tribes of Kurho and Otah.

"It is better that we should talk, even endlessly, than to use such weapons tribe against

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tribe!" Such was Otah's word to those who grumbled and those who feared, and there was much to indicate that such was Kurho's feeling too.

Indeed it appeared to be so! For the first time, Kurho relaxed his borders at Far End. Occasionally the Otah tribesmen were permitted to enter, welcomed without suspicion—a thing unprecedented! Similarly, select members from the Kurho tribe were accepted beyond the river; they displayed certain prowesses new to the Otah tribe, for in many ways these were a strange and fantastic people.

It seemed to be a beginning. Word went out in secret and still other word returned, in which Mai-ak played a great part. And so, after scores of days it was done: there would be a time of understanding; Kurho, himself, would cross the river to go in person among Otah's people! When this was done, Otah would also cross the river to observe the things at Far End!

But now growlings arose which even Otah could not contain. Kurho should not be welcomed! Kurho must not be trusted! Was not this the man who already had suppressed the minor tribes? Had he not flaunted his aim of one day taking the whole valley?

Nevertheless, Kurho came. He came in all his boast and arrogance. The time was not festive—he was made to feel that—but what Kurho felt he did not show. Extravagant point was made that he should see all that he wished! Across all the great series of ledges he was taken, both high and low and length and breadth, to observe the abundance and well-being and extent of the Otah tribe. Through all the near valley he was shown, even to the places of great hunting, that he might see how the tribe of Otah prospered in the Bringing.

Through it all, Kurho made a token show of interest; he twice lost his temper in boast against boast, but he was more often a blunt enigma. He saw much and said little. Those times when he did speak, so extravagant were his grunt and gesture that much was lost.

When Kurho departed at last for Far End, he had implanted a feeling of frustration and one thing more—the disturbing thought that not all of his own boasts were idle!

And now came the time for Otah to cross. It was done so quietly that not many knew he was gone, but soon the reports came: Otah had been received with great clamor and curiosity by the Kurho people, and accorded much honor! Aside from that, the result was much the same,

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as Otah saw much and said little and did not once lose his temper. Kurho persisted in his boast and claim, and it was rumored that the two leaders had gone so far as to discuss the weapons!

Rumor was true. Otah returned from Far End and immediately called Council, even as Kurho was calling Council. Little had been gained, little proven; the perilous thing was still there, that monstrous means of death that might come in a moment of temper or reprisal to either tribe. Alas, such weapons were not easily relinquished—and who would be first?

Plainly, the way would now be slow and heavy with suspicion, but a method to abate such a threat must soon be formulated.

On *that* Otah and Kurho were agreed!

So the two great leaders agreed, and were patient, and twice more there were meetings. So engrossed they became and even enamoured, that they were only dimly aware—

Others in the valley, those so scattered and isolate as to be considered only clans, had long watched and waited—and yearned. Neither the long-shaft weapon nor the way of making were longer secret—so why should they not also have?

Inevitably the reports trickled in. A lone clansman had been observed near the river, employing one of the weapons crudely devised but efficient. Some days later, one from the high-plateau was seen skulking the valley with such a weapon. Those lone ones, who barely subsisted in the barren places beyond river and cave, nor foraged afield—discreet and fleeting at first but with increased daring as the days went on.

And so fixed were Otah and Kurho that such reports were tolerated. There could be no threat here! True, the way of the making was no longer secret. True, such clan-people had long been despised and neglected and left to their own grubbing hunger—but was it not recognized, especially now, that the tribes of Otah and Kurho would determine the fate of all?

They erred—both Otah and Kurho. Neither would determine, nor would preponderance of weapons determine. It was not yet perceived that such clan-people were not Tribe-People, and thus could not know the meaning of Council, nor weigh consequence, nor realize in their new-found cleverness that a single arrogant act would trigger the first and final avalanche . . .

It came. It came on a day when a lone and hungry clansman found himself a full day's journey beyond the river; he was not of Otah's Tribe nor any

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tribe, nor did he know that the two he faced were of Kurho's Tribe. In the dispute over the Bring, so emboldened was he by his weapon newly-fashioned that he used it quick and surely.

He did not again look at the two bodies! Taking up his Bring, the lone one departed quite leisurely, without even the good sense to flee in horror of the consequence.

Consequence came. It came soon, before the sun was scarcely down. It came swiftly without question or council, as word reached Far End that two had been slain. Throughout the night it came in divergent attack, as Kurho deployed a token force near the river and sent his real strength high to the north, across the valley-rim and down upon Otah's people. It was at once attack and reprisal and reason!

And for Otah it was reason! For many weeks past, in test and maneuver of the long-shafts he had looked to the north. Now couriers brought the alarm swiftly, and within minutes his forces were launched—fearless ones who knew each foot of terrain by day or night. Otah led one contingent and Mai-ak the other, strategy being to stem Kurho's strength high upon the valley-rim, deplete the enemy and then join force to hunt down any who sifted through.

It was good strategy, the only strategy—and for a time it went well. Within the hour Kurho's forces were scattered, as attack and counter-attack surged and slashed in wild eruption of the long-shafts. Just as eruptive were the neuro-emotives, as each in his primal way must have known that *this* was the long awaitment, *this* was the grim finality in Kurho's boast and Otah's boast of weapons.

A few sifted through, but were quickly brought down as Otah's drifting rear-guard deployed to their assignments. It became evident early that Otah's tribe was more proficient in the long-shafts!

Alas, mere proficiency would not prevail against force of numbers. Well within the hour Otah knew it, knew with a raging despair that time was not with him, he had deployed too late with too little. Now he knew with consuming clarity, that despite the lulling pretense Kurho's boasts of strength had not been idle boasts!

This was Otah's last bitter thought, and then he was too occupied for cerebral indulgence. For the next minutes he wielded truer than any! Men came and fell, and others leaped and fell, skulls shattered, the life-stuff spurting, before Otah's shaft went spinning away in shattered ruin; he leaped to seize an-

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other, employed it in great sweeping swaths against those who still came. Two went down, but two came to fill the gap. In perfect unison, one parried as the other wielded truly to the mark . . .

It cannot be said, with surety, that Otah in that ultimate moment felt pain. It is fairly certain that both finitely and cosmically the initial numbing shock did register; and it may be assumed that he jolted rather horribly at the splintering bite of bone into brain. *But who can say he did not reach a point-of-prescience, that his neuro-thalamics did not leap to span the eons, and gape in horror, in that precise and endless time just before his brains spewed in a gush of grey and gore, to cerebrate no more?*

A MATTER of minutes, now. Both Kurho and Mai-ak knew it. The latter had glimpsed Otah's destruction, and with wild abandon sought to rally his men into the area.

There was no longer an area. There was clash and groan and rush and retreat, there was dark endless rock and a darker sky, from which the very stars seemed to recoil in darkest wonderment at man's senseless assault. The valley-rim yawned, and there Mai-ak made his stand and made it well.

He was unaware that Kurho was no more—that the man of boast was at this very moment a quivering, protoplasmic lump splattered across a dark crevice. A random weapon in a frantic hand had proved to be no respecter of person. Nor did it matter! Decimated as they were, enough of the enemy got through. Once propelled in the insane purpose there could be no stopping, as they descended upon Otah's people who huddled in the caves . . .

For weeks, they had been told that when it came it would be from above, sudden and savage without defense or recourse. Few had believed, or bothered to plot the route to safety. Would not these issues be resolved? Had not their caves been always safe and secure?

Now there was no time for belief or wonder. Within minutes none of Otah's tribe were alive, neither women nor children. Gor-wah the Old One remained, having failed in his exhortations; now he stood quite still, erect and waiting, with arms outflung as the weapons came swarming, and when that final blow fell the expression upon his mouth might have been a grimace or might have been a smile . . .

Nor did the others escape, those at Far End who also huddled and waited and would not

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believe. Their caves at the valley-floor were even less secure. Whether it was blinding hate or the bitter dregs of expediency, for Mai-ak and his remnants there was only one recourse now. It had been deeply ingrained!

Grimly they pursued the way, automaton-like, unresponsive now to horror or any emotive. And once again, within the hour the weapons fell.

It was swift and it was thorough.

Methodical. Merciless. Complete.

IT will not be said here when emotive-response returned. Does one return from a horror all-encompassing, or seek to requite the unrequited? Does one yearn for a Way that is no more when deadening shock has wiped it out?

The season of thaw came, and again the great cold and once more the thaw. Both Obe the Bear and the great saber-cats were at large across the valley, and for those few who remained the Bring was not easy now. There was more dangerous pray!

Lone clansman encountered clansman across his path, and there was furtive slinking. Each went silently alone and returned alone to his place of hiding. Bellies growled, but none dared use his weapon except in secret.

Perhaps a few, some isolate few remembered that time of chaos a season ago—but it was fleeting recall at best, as somatic responses rose to blot it out.

It was not to be forever! One thing remained, unasked and unbeknownst, grooved with synaptic permanence in their burgeoning brains. *This was neither beginning nor end: for though Otah's Tribe was gone, bellies still growled. Kurho's Tribe was no more, but the weapons yet remained.*

There could be no beginning or end—for would not new things come, means and methods and ways of devising so long as man remained? Was not this The Way?

Such were Mai-ak's thoughts at the time of the next thaw; when he felt the thing-that-prodded that would not let him be, and his anger became stubborn resolve; when day after day he bent the young saplings, and found a way at last to fasten the sinew.

When he pulled, finally, pulled with all his strength, and with great gloating saw his shaft go outward to a distance never yet conceived. . . .

THE END

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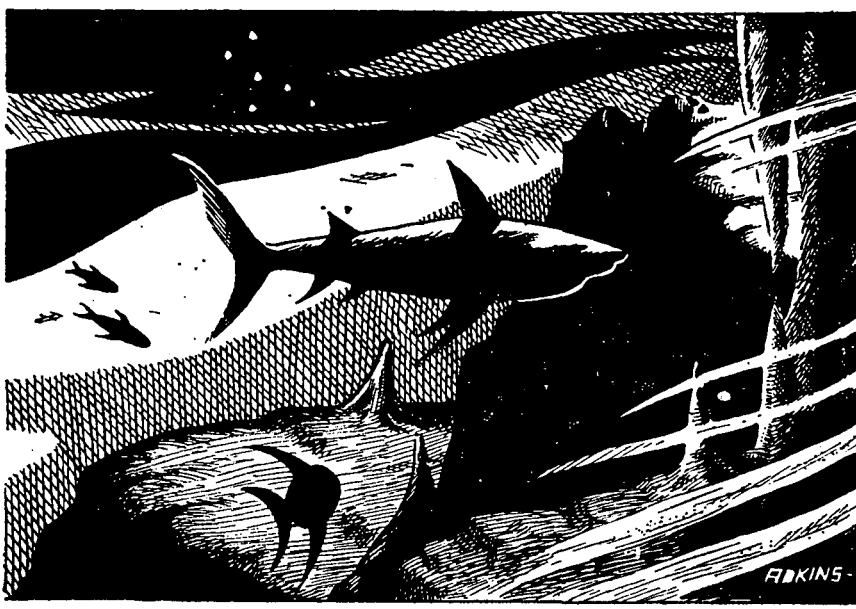
He was dragged back from death time after time. Now they had set a watch on him; for the rest of his life he would have a . . . .

DARK COMPANION

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by ADKINS



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ROCKLIN was beginning to come out of it. The anesthesia was wearing away in patches, giving him fitfull glimpses of the waking world. White ceiling overhead. He was immobile, he realized, in a thermonutrient bath. He could feel the warm fluid licking at him.

The rats, he thought. *They don't even give a man a chance to kill himself properly.*

He still didn't have control of his extremities. He tried to flex his hands, wondering if his fingers were still there. Or his toes. As long as they were going to force him to live, they could at least let him be intact. But he rather suspected they had. The surgeons would have been thorough about it. His family had money, enough money to make sure he got a regrow job on any missing parts.

Rocklin rolled his eyes around, but there was nothing in the path of vision but white ceiling. He was in the nutrient bath up to his neck, and rigidly supported. He tried to move his head and failed. After a moment he closed his eyes, more depressed than tired. The servoactuators would be summoning the doctors, now that he was awake. In a moment or two, there'd be a babble of voices.

It was getting harder and harder for a man to kill himself these days.

This had been Rocklin's third try at it in the past six months. He had been living on his family's farm off Barbados, with the token job of supervising the plankton harvest. But there was really nothing for him to do except sign the weekly pay vouchers. The real supervisory work was carried on by hired foremen. Rocklin had stayed on the farm for five weeks, reaching the boiling point. Then, one warm January morning, he had boarded the jet for Juneau. He had picked it simply as the northernmost city that could be reached direct. The cloying warmth of the Caribbean in January reminded him uncomfortably of the warmth of other seas on other planets, and when the brooding came over him the death-urge was unanswerable.

He went to Juneau. It was ten below when he got off the jet—a mild winter's afternoon. He had no luggage. He was dressed in a summer tunic.

There was a bar at the airport. He drank for an hour. Even at Juneau's prices, ten dollars' worth of martinis is a lot of liquor to drink in an hour. Throbbing with a false warmth, he wandered out into the dreary darkness of mid-afternoon. Snow was falling. White, cleansing snow. Rocklin walked for half an hour, while the snow drifted lightly down, frosting his hair

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and his eyebrows, until finally he grew tired and felt himself growing sober, and he lay down in a snowbank so cold that it felt warm to his skin, and closed his eyes, and smiled as the slow gentle flakes began to cover him. No one would ever find him in time. he thought. He would rest, and then he would sleep, and the sleep would last eternally, and the dull ache of guilt in his heart would be stilled forever. No more dreams. No more nightmares.

No more Leon Rocklin.

Consciousness departed—

And returned.

The doctors were gathering, now. Rocklin couldn't see them, but he could feel their presence. They were down at the foot of his tank now, peering at the readings on the dials of the various bionic devices that metered the ebb and flow of his life.

"Let the traction ease," someone murmured. "If he's conscious, there's no need to squeeze him that way."

Rocklin did not open his eyes. The EEG readings were all they needed to tell that he had returned to awareness. He could hear them making adjustments now in the strictures that held him immobile in the nutrient bath. The soft rollers that had gripped his body, massaging and exercising it, eased away from him now. The neck of the tank opened wider. He still could not move his body freely—there wasn't enough room in the tank for that—but at least he could crane his neck around sufficiently to see where he was and who was with him.

It was a private room. Of course. His parents didn't believe in stinting when it came to medical care. A private room ran a thousand dollars a week, but what of it when an only son was involved?

Three doctors stood at the foot of his tank. An old wise one and two residents in their mid-twenties. Further back in the room, Rocklin saw his mother, looking gaunt and haggard. His father, tight-lipped, bleak-faced.

"Leon!" his mother shrilled.

One of the residents turned to her. The old doctor advanced until he was within two feet of Rocklin's upturned face and said, "You've been making remarkable progress, young man. I'm happy to tell you there's no danger of gangrene."

"That's just fine," Rocklin said with a bitterness that cut into the startled old man like a whiplash.

Recoiling, the doctor said, "We'll be transferring you to recreational therapy in a couple of weeks. You'll be good as new by the end of the month. This is Dr. Heinson, who's been in charge of your case."

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One of the residents stepped forward, a thin, intense-looking young man. He could not have been more than twenty-six, the same age as Rocklin. The old doctor exited, and Heinson hovered over Rocklin's tank.

The medic said, "Your parents are here, Mr. Rocklin. We don't want to excite you too much on your first day back, but you can talk to them a few minutes."

"I don't want to."

"Leon!" came the shrill wail.

"Please, Mrs. Rocklin," Heinson said quietly. He looked down at Rocklin with a professional patience far beyond his years. *He hates me,* Rocklin thought. *Because I'm a spoiled brat who's had every advantage while he's been plugging through med school. Well, to hell with him. The hell with them all.*

Heinson said gently, "I know you're still not quite used to other people, after a month in the tank. But try to speak to your parents. They've been so worried since—"

"A month in the tank?" Rocklin gasped.

"That's right. You were brought in on the 27th of January, and today's the first of March. Severe frostbite and general overrefrigeration. Your body temperature was in the 70's when you were found, Mr. Rocklin. But you're back to good shape now. You—"

"Did you have to do it?" Rocklin asked. "Did you have to meddle? Can't a man die when he wants to?"

The medic looked at him as though he would be glad to administer euthanasia on the spot. "Our lives are entrusted to us at birth, Mr. Rocklin. We don't have the right to break our trust. Suppose you talk to your parents now."

Heinson and the other medic retreated to a point beyond Rocklin's field of vision.

His mother looked down at him.

"Leon, why did you do it?"

"Because I was tired of living," he said stolidly.

She was fighting back the tears. "Three times in the past six months! Leon, Leon, don't you realize that since Jeff died you're all we have left?"

"Me and twenty million bucks."

"Can money buy us a new son?" she demanded. "Leon, why do you treat us this way? Why?"

He was silent.

His father was in the picture, now. Dour, tense, doubly distant from Rocklin after all that had happened. As always, a man of few words. He said simply, "You'll get nowhere talking to him, Myra. Suicide's not a thing you can argue about rationally. There's only one thing to do and we've done it."

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Rocklin glared up at his father. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll have a Companion," the elder Rocklin said in firm, no-nonsense tones.

His parents went away, after that. There was no possibility of further conversation. Rocklin refused to talk to them. He retreated into a shell as complete as the nutrient bath that had held him for a month.

A Companion! He seethed with anger. What did they think he was, anyway, a—

—child?

Yes. An irresponsible child who was likely to try to take his own life whenever he was left alone. So they would see to it he was never alone again. Closing his eyes, Rocklin let the anger boil through him. Twelve floors below, in the heart of the hospital, a red light flashed on a control panel, and the medical technician who was monitoring his floor automatically jabbed a button. An ultrasonic spraygun touched Rocklin's arm, twelve floors above, and within a moment he was asleep while ataractics neutralized the enzymes of rage that had been let loose in his system.

He slept.

The rubber rollers kneaded his recuperating body.

Warm nutrient fluid bathed him, was pumped out, was renewed. The damaged outer rind of flesh has been peeled away when his frost-blackened body had been found in the snow. Inside the tank, he was naked down to the nerves, skinless, a flayed lump of healing meat. No need for skin-grafts, now that the skin itself was capable of regrowth. Cell after epithelial cell joined together as the days passed. Rocklin lay in his tank, asleep more than he was awake, while unseen tubes carried on the processes of metabolism for him. A vegetable existence, so close to death that he scarcely minded being alive.

During the hours of consciousness, gradually increased each day, he thought about the past year.

Thought about his brother Jeff dying in a sleeting fury of exploding steel.

Thought about the day he had slashed his wrists and watched strangely bright blood bubble down over the tiles of his bathroom.

Thought about the evening when he had gone to the poor quarter of town, into an old house that still had gas jets in the kitchen, and had turned the gas on and sealed the windows and waited.

Thought about lying down in the warm, soft snow.

They didn't even let a man die

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decently these days. The damned electronic eyes were everywhere, soaking up data and releasing it. How had they found him, locked into his own bathroom with his life's fluid dribbling out? He didn't know that. But a ponderous roboservitor had smashed open the door and carried him to safety. How had they known about the gas jet? How had they found him in the snow?

Eyes.

Eyes everywhere.

And now there would be not only eyes but hands and a voice and a body, to keep him from harming himself. A Companion. Rocklin's lips firmed in a scowl. None of them understood. They gave him jaw-music about how sacrosanct a human life was, and they kept him alive.

One day they drained away the fluid completely. The medics looked at the instruments and nodded, and the roller-grips relaxed and the tank opened and Rocklin looked at his naked body for the first time in seven weeks.

He looked pink and new and hairless. Four of his toes were gone, the two outer ones on each foot, and in their place were the stubby little buds of regenerated flesh. His left pinkie was gone, too.

"It'll take about a year and a half for them to grow back fully," the medics told him.

He nodded without caring.

His skin had a newborn look about it. When he touched a fingertip to his thigh, the white imprint lingered a long while, turning an angry red. He slowly lifted one leg. Even though his muscles had been exercised regularly, the tendons quivered with the unaccustomed strain.

"Three weeks of physical therapy," they told him. "Then you'll be as good as new."

His mother didn't come to see him being taken from the tank. But his father was there to watch as rubberized grips lifted him out of the thermonutrient womb in which he had lain since the end of January, and stood him on his own feet again. His weight was supported for a moment; then he stood alone, weak and wobbly, and took a few hesitant steps. They draped a robe around him. He felt himself swaying, and wanted to sit down, and found himself falling, but the servo behind him moved up efficiently, taking him ever so gently under the armpits and supporting him again.

His father said, "As soon as your therapy is finished, you'll leave on a vacation trip. A year's travel ought to bring you back to some sort of mental balance."

Rocklin smiled. "So I'm to be a 24th-century remittance man, father?"

"I don't understand."

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"I can go anywhere I please. Just so long as I don't do anything scandalous on the family hearth."

"We want you to be your old self again, Leon," the old man said.

"I *am* my old self. And always have been."

"No. You're unstable. We can't have that. Now that Jeff's gone, you'll inherit. Have I done all my building for nothing? A scowl creased the brooding face. "A year's travel and you'll recover. But we'll take no more chances with you. Three times is enough." Old Rocklin turned. "Bring in the Companion."

"I thought you had forgotten about that," Rocklin said.

The Companion entered.

He stepped through the scything doors and went immediately to Rocklin, extending a hand.

"You're Leon," he said in blunt greeting. "You can call me Roy."

Rocklin stared disdainfully at the outstretched hand. The Companion was a tall, athletically-built young man, looking to be in his late twenties. He was well dressed and moved with an easy grace. His skin, a dark bluish-violet with undertones of greenish-bronze, was not the color of the skins of any of the races of men.

"I don't want you," Rocklin said. "Get out of here!"

The Companion's smile was unfailingly affable. "You don't really have a choice, I'm afraid. The one command I can't obey is a dismissal from *you*. It looks like you're stuck with me and me with you. Let's both make the best of it."

Rocklin stared at his father. "How could you do this to me?"

"It was the only way," the old man said. "Don't try to fight it now. Excuse me, Leon."

He turned and was gone. Now only the Companion and the medic and the medic's servo remained in the room.

Rocklin said slowly to the Companion, "You're just a heap of chemicals. You're something slimy that sprouted from a test-tube."

"Are you trying to insult me?" the Companion asked.

"I'm telling you what you are."

"I'm an imitation human," the Companion said lightly. "There are times when I wish my builders had picked a better model to pattern me after. Like a bird, or a fish. But I didn't have any choice about being shaped human. I make the most of it. I'm a philosopher about some things."

"You're a stinking android," Rocklin said.

"What of it? Do you want me to describe the process by which *you* were brought into the world? I've seen it performed, Leon. It's the most ludicrous

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kind of bestial grappling you can imagine. Two people sweating and groaning and gasping—and then, nine months later, the messiness of birth." The Companion shook his head. "The only difference between us is that I was born efficiently and you weren't."

Rocklin stared levelly at the android for a long moment. He bit down hard on his lip and told himself that there was no point in baiting the Companion. Insulting an android was like making love to a rubber doll or drinking rum extract instead of real rum. Beyond the superficialities, there was no real satisfaction.

He sighed. "All right," he said. "So I've got a Companion. I don't envy you, Roy. I'm not an easy assignment."

"I like a challenge, Leon."

"I'm terribly spoiled, too."

"All the better," Roy said. He glanced at the medic. "Is it all right if Mr. Rocklin and I begin his therapy?"

Within a week, Rocklin discovered that he liked the android Companion as well as he had ever liked any other person. *Person.* Yes, the android was a person, human in every respect save the dark purple color of his skin and the fact that he could not reproduce. But Roy was more than human in some ways. He was faster than any human being, for one thing. He could run a mile in three minutes, if he had to, for his efficiently-designed metabolism generated no fatigue poisons to slow him down. He could do eight feet in the running high-jump. The hair-trigger coordination of his wrists could drive a baseball five hundred feet ten swings out of ten. And he could cross a room at close to blinding speed to snatch a knife out of a would-be suicide's hand, if he had to. As a trained Companion, Roy's job was to be ever alert for a suicidal motion. Unsleeping, eternally watchful, the Companion kept men alive against their wills.

And he knew how to make himself liked.

Rocklin's early antagonism vanished within a couple of days. He hated the idea of being tagged with a Companion, hated his father for having bought him one—but Roy swiftly made him realize that there was nothing to be gained by hating the Companion himself.

They became friends.

The Companion took part in Rocklin's therapy. For an hour each morning and an hour each afternoon, they tossed a medicine ball back and forth. They swam in the hospital pool. They lifted weights. Roy was Rocklin's shadow. When Rocklin showered in the locker rooms, Roy

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showered next to him, his tapering, sexless purple body glittering under the cascades of water.

"You don't need to take a shower," Rocklin pointed out. "You haven't been sweating."

Roy smiled. "I like the feel of cold water, that's all."

"I can't kill myself under a shower. What are you afraid I'll do? Turn the hot water on and scald myself?"

"You might slip on a piece of soap," Roy suggested. "I'm here to catch you before you crack your skull."

"Would anyone commit suicide by slipping on soap?"

Roy grinned. "I'm supposed to guard you against natural occurrences too. Your parents are crazy to see you outlive them, you know that?"

"So I gather," Rocklin said, shutting off the water and pressing for the autotowel.

He chafed under the constant watchful vigilance of the Companion. There wasn't any activity they didn't do together. And, at night, the android stood guard in his room. 24-hour-a-day surveillance could be intolerable. What surprised Rocklin more than anything else was the fact that it was not.

Roy was a good Companion. He was always ready with a quip, a gag, an irreverent comment. He didn't take himself or his employers seriously, at least not openly.

The weeks passed. Rocklin's skin had toughened and his strength had returned, and the tiny buds of toes and pinkies were growing visibly. An hour a day of psychotherapy left him cheerful and outwardly calm. He managed to conceal—successfully, he hoped—the inward fester of guilt and self-torment that had driven him to attempt suicide three times. He wanted to get out of the hospital. Having a Companion was bad enough, but this army of medics and servos and clicking spy-eyes made self-destruction utterly impossible. In order to outwit the Companion, he would have to go somewhere where the odds would be more in his favor.

The day of his discharge from the hospital came. It was mid-April, by now, and he was in tip-top shape. Neither of his parents came to see him off. A packet arrived, by special messenger, delivered to Roy.

The android opened it.

"What's inside?" Rocklin asked.

"Spaceliner tickets. Hotel reservations. Letters of credit. And money." Roy grinned amiably. "Boy, we're going to take a trip!"

It was on the third day of a nine-day cruise to Huyckman IV that Rocklin tried to kill himself

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for the fourth time. It had been building up in him slowly for days, the fitful depression, the damp cold feeling that he had no business being alive. A garrulous drunk in the ship's lounge had triggered the mania with a chance remark about cowardice shown by some diplomats during an anti-Terran riot on Vorrilan. "You should have seen the yellow bums!" the man exclaimed. "I was locked in the embassy with them, and they were puking their guts out every time one of the Vorrilani heaved another stink-bomb through the window. If you ever want to see something that'll shake your faith in the essential backbone of humanity, it's when a man of fifty is so afraid he's going to die that he wets his pants out of fright. Hell, what's so awful about dying? You'd think—"

"Shut up," Rocklin said.

"What was that?"

"I said shut up! I don't want you to talk to me, that's what I said!"

Roy tactfully steered him to another part of the lounge. But a month's hard-won calm had been shattered in an instant. It took a couple of days more for the core of Rocklin's person to be reached by the burrowing worm of self-loathing, and then as he looked in the mirror on the third morning of the cruise he knew he had no right to be still alive when Jeff was dead, no right to have let him die—

There were ataractics in the medicine cabinet. Tranquilizers. One tablet would bring relief from jitters; two would induce complete calm; three would cause abnormal relaxation. Fifteen or twenty tablets would be fatal, the involuntary nervous system blanked out nearly totally. Committing suicide with the pills was difficult, because after the second or third it was hard to maintain the singleness of will necessary to keep on swallowing them. But a sufficiently determined man—

He let the packet slip into his tunic. Twenty tablets. That would be about enough.

Roy was standing nearby, but if he had seen the gesture he took no notice of it. Rocklin went to work depilating his cheeks, and casually slipped a pill into his mouth and swallowed it dry. It would take some time to go to work. Enough time for another pill, and another. He had three tablets in his system by the time he had finished with his face. The first was starting to take effect, and he was getting limp of will. But he spurred himself on with the thought of his cowardice. Now it was easy, a fourth pill, a fifth, a sixth, gobbled down like candy every time he could turn part of his body away from Roy's watchful eyes, and—

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"What are you up to?" the android demanded.

"Me?" Rocklin yawned. "I don't get you."

"Elbow motions. You putting something in your mouth?"

"Don't be silly." He bent over to scratch his knee, and wormed another pill out of his tunic pocket. Then Roy's dark hand was around his wrist, and the pill tumbled free, bouncing on the tile floor. The Companion scooped it up.

"What is it?"

"None of your business." Rocklin was terribly drowsy now, but he still wanted those pills.

Roy popped the tablet into his own mouth to analyze it. His eyes widened. "Happy pills. Why'd you take it?"

"I felt jittery."

"Give me the box."

"I had the last one."

"There were two dozen of them this morning." Roy peered into the cabinet. "Where's the box?"

Meekly, Rocklin handed it over. The pills he had already taken left him with little will to resist. The android counted swiftly through the box, scowling. "You've had six already, you idiot!" He moved toward Rocklin and seized him firmly, prying his mouth open and thrusting a finger in deep, to the base of Rocklin's tongue. Rocklin retched, gagged, tried limply to push Roy away, but there was no resisting the Companion, and in a moment Rocklin was on his knees emptying his stomach's contents into the bowl. He rose a moment later, shaky and white-faced.

"You didn't have to do that," he said accusingly.

"It's easier on you than a stomach pump." Roy led his charge into the other room of their luxury cabin and pushed him down on the bed. "Can't you understand that I'm *watching* you?" he asked. "It isn't worth trying."

"You didn't notice till I had eaten six pills."

"Six weren't enough to kill you."

"Suppose I'd been swallowing cyanide?" Rocklin asked, with a small-boy triumphal grin.

"First you have to *get* the cyanide," Roy said tiredly. "The only drugs in here that could possibly be fatal are the ataractics. And you couldn't get them all in you without my noticing. You can't win, Rocklin."

"I'll manage sooner or later," Rocklin muttered.

Later that afternoon they sat in the ship's first-class lounge, staring out at the pinwheeling glory of radiance that filled the endless night of hyperspace. The distorted hyperspace shadows of the real universe showed up as

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light of many colors, twisted and angled into alien contortions that formed the most spectacular sight any human mind had experienced. The brilliance of the display was almost blinding; the lounge windows were open only a few hours a day.

They ordered drinks, Rocklin calling for a martini and the android for green chartreuse. Rocklin smiled at the liqueur and said, "Why should an android waste good money on alcohol? You can't get drunk, can you?"

"I can metabolize all the alcohol I take in," Roy said. "So I don't get tipsy. But I have a feeling that I wouldn't *want* to get tipsy even if I could. I just happen to like the taste of certain drinks."

"You sound so smug sometimes," Rocklin said. "But it's all sour grapes. I'll bet you'd give your left ear to find out what it's like to get drunk. Not to mention what you'd give if you knew what it was like to make love to a woman."

"You forget I'm not human," the Companion said smoothly. "I don't have your drives and compulsions. I'm quite happy with myself the way I am."

"But there are some pleasures a human being has worth all our inefficiencies of construction.—"

"If human life is so precious to you," Roy cut in, "Why are you so eager to get rid of it?"

Rocklin's expression darkened. "That has nothing to do with what we're talking about."

"Sure it does. Sex and drink are important to you. Dead men don't have any sex life." Roy leaned forward, his intelligent eyes searching deeply. "Let down the barriers, man. Why are you so red hot about killing yourself?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But I do," the Companion said. "I'm faced with spending the next sixty years with you. I want to know what my job's all about. Why do you hate yourself so much?"

Rocklin downed the martini. "Let's just say I missed an opportunity. And I regret it so much that I don't want to stay alive any more."

"Tell me about it."

"No."

"Do I have to drag it out of you hypnotically?"

"You wouldn't do that," Rocklin said.

"Sure I would. I'm unscrupulous, and my curiosity's aroused. I've got no gonads, but I've got a well-developed curiosity. What's the story? You've been holding out too long."

Rocklin put his thumbs wearily to his eyeballs, clasping his hands over his ears, and pressed his skull as though trying to squeeze the sickness out of it. After a long moment he said,

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"All right. I guess it's about time I finally got it out, but you must promise never to tell anybody, especially my parents."

"It's a deal."

It had been a year before. Rocklin was vacationing on Dennison VII, an Earth-style world were his parents' corporation held several plantations. He was ostensibly looking into the management of the holdings, but the real purpose of the trip was a vacation. Most of Dennison VII was in a tropical belt, and there were lithe colonist girls who wore next to nothing, and took even that off to swim in the warm seas. There had been a third-generation girl named Laraine, whose father worked as an overseer on the Rocklin land, and Rocklin had stood on shore watching the sleek tanned beauty of her as she glided through the waves, and he had stripped and gone in after her, and her lips had tasted salty and her body was exciting and the beach was empty.

There were other girls like Laraine, and there was a cloudy liquor that they made from a spicy root, and the skies were blue and the sun hot, and three months had passed. And then Rocklin's brother Jeff had arrived.

Jeff was three years older, at twenty-nine, and Jeff was the heir apparent to the far-flung Rocklin empire. Tall and bronzed and muscular, he had his brother's good looks, but none of his brother's weakness. Jeff was a businessman. Jeff was his father's son. There was little warmth between the brothers. From the very beginning, there was the understanding that Jeff would work hard and take over the business, while Leon would live well and keep out of everybody's hair.

"Why'd you come here?" Rocklin demanded when Jeff arrived on Dennison VII. "You checking up on me?"

"Not on you," Jeff said, hardly bothering to veil his contempt for his younger brother. "I'm checking up on the managers here. We couldn't trust you to do it. This place isn't run right."

So Jeff checked. He went over the books and called men into his office and delivered blistering harangues. Rocklin watched from a distance, awed by his brother's efficiency and capability in handling men. He heard people whispering, too, about the difference between the two brothers, how Jeff was hard as nails and the other one a good-for-nothing beachcomber lucky enough to have been born to wealth. Rocklin didn't like the unfavorable comparisons, but he was realistic enough to know that they were the truth.

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Then came the day when Jeff wanted to inspect the tunnels of the copper mines that had been opened recently, at great cost and with little yield. That morning, when Rocklin went to the beach, Laraine was not there, and when she did come, she looked troubled and worried. It took him a long time to get at the source of her uneasiness. Finally, as they floated lazily on the waves, she gasped it out.

"Leon, they're going to kill your brother."

"Who is? Where? What?"

"This afternoon. In the mines. I heard them talking in the compound last night."

Rocklin grew pale, and tension wrapped an iron band around his chest. He dragged the girl to shore and they sprawled down in the sand. "Now, what's all this about killing Jeff?"

"He's discovered shortages. Half a dozen of the bosses were stealing from the company, and Jeff's found them out. So they're going to gimmick the control panel in the mine shaft. When he goes in there to check on things, the panel's going to blow up. They'll call it an overload. They'll be very regretful about the whole thing. But Jeff will be dead."

Rocklin had no more desire for lovemaking that morning. He left Laraine and wandered, panicky, over the deserted beach. Jeff was scheduled to go down into the mine at noon. It was almost that now. Hardly enough time to warn him. And Jeff wouldn't believe the warning, anyway.

Rocklin commandeered a company truck and headed for the entrance to the mineshafts. He drove badly; his nerves were stretching to the breaking-point now. Suppose Jeff did get killed? They might turn on him too, wiping out both Rocklin brothers. The smart thing was to drive to the spaceport and catch the first flight out.

Scram, he thought, *while the scramming's good. Save your own skin. Jeff's only getting what's coming to him for being so damn nosy.*

He turned the truck around and drove for ten minutes in the opposite direction, back toward the spaceport. Ships left for Denisson V three times a week, and today was one of the days. He could get a berth on the strength of his name alone, and once on V he could arrange for credit, and transportation away from the violent frontier worlds out here. But before he had gone five miles, he swung the truck around again. He couldn't let Jeff go unwarned to his death. He *couldn't.*

It was ten after twelve when Rocklin reached the opening of

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the mineshaft. He drove through the main gate, and as the guards came out to intercept him he said, "Is my brother here yet?"

"Sure is, Mr. Rocklin. Went down the shaft five minutes ago."

Rocklin sweated. What if he got there just as it exploded? What if the shaft caved in and trapped him? What if—

"Is there a phone?" Rocklin asked. "I want to talk to him."

They tried to get him. But Jeff was somewhere in the shaft, and they couldn't reach him. Rocklin dithered a few more minutes. Then he declared that he would go down into the shaft himself.

The elevator took him down. He reached the base level, where the control panels were. He asked where Jeff was, and the men pointed silently ahead.

He ran. Tension made him stumble. He sidestepped heavy servo trucks and sprinted on toward the master control panel. There was Jeff now; Rocklin caught sight of his dark grey overalls outlined against the big control panel. The shaft was reinforced here with heavy concentric rings of blue-green shoring. Rocklin clambered up.

"Jeff! No! Don't touch the panel—" he cried.

The explosion rocked the shaft. A booming blast of air knocked Rocklin on his back, and he saw Jeff engulfed in flame.

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The android nodded. "So your brother was killed?"

"He died instantly," Rocklin said in a hoarse voice. "I escaped with bruises. The shaft held, somehow. I left the planet at the end of the week without testifying in the inquest. Later they found parts of the bomb, but I don't think anyone was arrested."

"And this is why you hate yourself so much?"

Rocklin clenched his fists and looked at the budding nubbins of his pinkies. He said in a barely audible voice, "I murdered my brother. Can't you see that? My hesitation, my cowardly shilly-shallying—those ten minutes when I drove the wrong way—if I hadn't wasted even two of those minutes, Jeff would be alive. But I was afraid to act. Paralyzed. I let him go into the shaft."

"You went after him," Roy pointed out.

"Only a gesture. I knew I couldn't possibly save him in time. I *wanted* him to die, I'm sure. That's why I wasted so much time. Hell, I spent my whole life boozing and snoozing, and he was a pillar of the community, and don't you think I resented his superiority?"

"So you feel you have to kill yourself because you're morally guilty of letting your brother die?"

"That's right."

The android's voice was feather-light. "You're a phony, Leon."

"W-what?"

"You're putting on an act. You've cast yourself in the lead of a little melodrama. You want everyone to be worried about you because of your suicidal tendencies. But you don't really want to die. You don't have the guts to kill yourself, any more than you had the guts to save your brother."

"You can't talk to me like this!" Rocklin blustered. "You're supposed to protect me, not to insult me!"

"I'm telling you the truth about yourself."

"You aren't. I *want* to die."

"Then why did you phone the police before you cut your wrists? Why did you do the same thing when you turned on the gas. Why did you tell a man at the bar in Juneau that you were going to lie down in the snow and die? Why did you try to sneak ataractics into your mouth right in front of me?"

"I didn't," Rocklin said dazedly. "Who told you I called the police, that I—"

"It's on your psych record," Roy said. "Each and every time you tried suicide, you made damned sure you wouldn't succeed."

Rocklin blinked in bafflement.

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"I swear to you I don't remember any such thing!"

"Maybe not. You're just sick enough not to have been aware of what you were up to. But tell me this: why didn't you try suicide by some more reliable method than the ones you used? It's not hard to give transfusions to a man who's cut his wrists. But try patching up a corpse that's fallen fifty stories! Or you could have put a bullet through your brain. The medics can't repair a shattered brain, either. You could have picked plenty of sure-fire methods. But you didn't. That's why I say you're a phony, Leon."

Rocklin ran his tongue around dry lips. Within, he had a sick, chilled feeling. The android's words had cut deep, laying bare aspects of himself Rocklin had not even suspected. He said hesitantly, "Try me. Leave me alone for five minutes and see what I do."

"Maybe some other time," Roy replied.

"But if you don't believe I want to—"

"You might prove I was wrong, just this once. And then I'd get dissolved. And I *do* want to live."

"Dissolved?"

"Sure," the android said. "If I let you kill yourself, it means I haven't done my job efficiently. There's no room for inefficient Companions. We go back to the components tank and get broken down for another try. I die if you do. Knowing that keeps me alert."

They made planetfall early the following week, without further incident. Rockl n had not ceased to brood over the harsh clarity of the android's words. His suicide-urge had become slightly ludicrous to him now that Roy had painted it as a melodramatic gesture, a grandstand play, rather than the expression of inner torment he thought he was making. Already, Jeff's death was beginning to fade in memory. Rocklin began to lose some of the numbing sense of guilt that had entangled him all year.

The android's ruthless honesty had opened his eyes. But with self-knowledge did not come a lessening of self-contempt. He still despised himself, but for different reasons now. He still had the stain of Jeff's death on his soul—and the stain of his own theatrical spuriousness as well.

The excitement of reaching a new planet, though, took his mind from his inner conflicts. Huyckman IV was an Earthlike planet that was part of the gigantic Interworld Recreation Corporation chain, and it was one of the few pleasure planets that Rocklin had never visited.

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The sky was full of stars, and most of the stars had planetary systems, and none of the other races of the universe had come close to a technological age. Only a handful of species could even be considered intelligent. Which left hundreds of planets for Earthmen to colonize. More planets, in fact, than there were available colonists to settle. IRC, therefore, had bought up some of the more scenic ones for pure non-colonial purposes; the company's charter was subject to revocation on ten years' notice in case it ever became necessary to convert one of the playground planets to more productive use.

Huyckman IV was a gem. Six thousand five hundred miles in diameter, it had four major continents and several huge archipelagoes, and ran a climatic gamut from blazing desert to arctic waste. A mountain range of Himalayan magnitude provided some of the best climbing in the galaxy; an unspoiled continent in the temperate zone afforded magnificent hunting; the big island chain in the eastern hemisphere yielded superb tropical fish up to thirty feet in length. It was a spectacular planet. It was still undeveloped —only nine hotels on the entire world—but speedy jetcopters cut down distance for hunters or climbers who ventured off the beaten trails.

Rocklin and his Companion were making their first stop at the hotel in the center of the island chain that jutted out more than a thousand miles from the southern tip of the eastern continent. The spacelaunch ferried them down from their liner at dawn, bringing them down on a beach of black volcanic sand. Blue, glistening waves rolled in with a booming roar, leaving an ebbing line of almost luminous foam. Far away, at the horizon, a golden-red sun was rising, sending a widening path of flame across the surface of the sea. The air had a salty but unearthly tang. Behind them, towering palm trees rose more than two hundred feet straight up before branching into leaves. And, further back at the edge of a cliff, the hotel jutted steeply upward, a stunning pile of glass and daring masonry.

"Look around you," Roy whispered. "If there was ever a sight to make a man want to live, this is it."

"Sky. Water. Trees," Rocklin said dourly.

"You aren't moved by it?"

"I'm hungry. Which way is breakfast?"

They checked into the hotel. It had four hundred rooms, all but a handful occupied. They breakfasted on their terrace, overlooking the shimmering morning

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sea, and Rocklin maintained a glum silence.

"We'll rent a boat this afternoon and wander," Roy was saying. "Fish till nightfall, then back here and—what's the matter with you? Sulking?"

"I'm not in a good mood."

"So I see. What's the story? Look, maybe you want a woman." The android grinned pleasantly. "I'll phone the management and have them send someone up."

"While you stand here and watch?"

"I'll be unobtrusive about it. I'll hide behind a closet door. I've had plenty of experience at being tactful."

Rocklin shook his head. "No."

"If that's the way you feel—"

"Can't I ever get rid of you?" Rocklin blazed. "24 hours a day for weeks and weeks now! Listen—" He grasped the android's purple hand. "You yourself said I'm not really interested in killing myself. Can't you go away for a little while? Two or three days? Long enough for me to remember what it was like to be alone?"

"Impossible."

"Am I going to be a Siamese twin the rest of my life?"

"Until the order of commitment that ties me to you is cancelled," Roy said. "I'm sorry. I didn't ask to be your keeper, but that's why I was created."

"I'll go out of my mind. If I'm not out of it already."

"Other people have learned to live with a Companion," Roy said.

Rocklin buried his head in his hands. "How much do you cost, anyway?"

"The fee for Companion service is two hundred dollars a day."

Rocklin groaned. "They're willing to spend so much to keep me under watch!"

"You brought it on yourself," Roy pointed out. "Your parents want you to live. To be a healthy, well-adjusted young millionaire."

"I'll pay you two hundred fifty a day to leave me alone!"

"What would *I* need money for?" the android asked, laughing. "Come on. Let's get out and get some exercise. It'll do us both some good."

In the hotel lobby, Roy arranged for the rental of a fishing boat while Rocklin stood to one side, fidgeting and uncomfortable. He was heartily sick of being Companied. He told himself over and over again that his days of suiciding were behind him, that it was all a bad dream, that though he was in shaky shape emotionally he had come a long way since the day he had first tried to do away with himself. The android's cool realism had done a great deal to cut

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through the fog of self-pity and self-loathing that had enshrouded him.

But he was stuck with the Companion anyway.

For life? Why not? His parents would never come to realize that the need for the android had expired. They would always think of him as the unstable son, the one who didn't turn out well, the one who had to be guarded against himself. And so, forever, the dark lithe shape of the android would dog his steps, ready to move with supernatural swiftness at the first sign of a self-destructive impulse.

"Do you want a boat for two?" the desk android said. "Or would you prefer to go with a small group?"

"Two, I think," Roy said.

"No. Make it a group," Rocklin cut in. The idea of spending an entire day out with just Roy appalled him. He needed variety. He needed to *talk* to someone.

"There's a party of four leaving in an hour. I'll put you in and make it six. They're very interesting people, all of them."

"We'll take it," Rocklin said.

They strolled down to the beach to meet the other members of their party. Two couples, Rocklin saw. But as he drew closer he realized that one of the couples consisted either of father and daughter or of a May-December mating.

Father and daughter turned out to be the right guess. The girl was about eighteen, a redhead with sleek tanned skin and a sprayon swimsuit that troubled Rocklin's hormone balance. He didn't mind complete nudity half so much as this provocative nudity-covered-with-paint that had come into fashion lately, particularly among the younger girls.

"I'm Terry Ravenhurst," the girl said in clipped, colonial-sounding accents. "My father, Harold Ravenhurst. This is my graduation trip, and I'm having the time of my life!"

"Leon Rocklin," he said gravely. "And my Companion Roy."

"Pleased," Ravenhurst said. He shook first Rocklin's hand, then the android's. Android Companions were accepted with perfect aplomb by everyone; to speculate openly as to the reason a man was travelling with a Companion would be as graceless as openly calling attention to a man's deformity.

"Ree Gardner," the other man said brusquely. "My wife, Dorna. We're from Hammermill IX."

"I'm from earth," Rocklin said.

"We're going to Earth next month," Terry Ravenhurst bubbled. "I've never been there. We live on Dornall II. This my first trip off-planet!"

Just a child, Rocklin thought.

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A beautiful child with a woman's full body, but a child all the same. From the vantage-point of his twenty-six years, he felt terribly old. Desire stirred in him at the sight of the girl covered only by molecule-thick coating of glistening paint, and he sighed. It would be hard enough to get anywhere with her with her father around, but the presence of the android made everything impossible.

He sat down on the edge of a beached rowboat to wait for the arrival of their fishing vessel.

It was a trim thirty-footer, robot-handled. The six of them boarded and with a soft humming of turbines it put out to sea. Dark clouds hung low in the distance, bottoming almost to the water's surface. Terry Ravenhurst stood in the fore, keeping an eye on the radar screen that sounded any large sea creature. Ree Gardner busied himself checking out the harpoons. Rocklin, Roy, Lorna Gardser, and old Ravenhurst basked in the sun.

I could leap overboard if I wanted to, Rocklin thought. *Would Roy be able to catch me? He might not even notice for a couple of minutes. Long enough for me to get lost in the sea.* But, he realized oddly, he did not want to jump overboard and be drowned. Roy was right. Life had too much to offer. The sight of dawn along a tropic beach, the taste of a succulent steak, the sight of Terry Ravenhurst's youthful, flaring hips beneath their bizarre striped sprayon covering—

If I could only forget about Jeff, he thought.

And if I could only get rid of the android and live a normal life again.

But the shadow of Jeff's death darkened his mind, depressing him once again. His mood altered in a moment. Once again he shuddered under the crushing burden of guilt, and knew that he was fated to have Roy guarding him forever.

"Look!" Terry cried. "Something off to starboard!"

The five of them rushed to the radar screen. A dark shape was passing far beneath the ship.

"Too deep," Havenhurst muttered.

"And too big. Too big by far. We aren't cut out for hunting monsters," Gardner murmured.

"How big do you figure that one was?" Rocklin asked.

Gardner shrugged. "Eighty feet. And all teeth. We don't want to make trouble for that kind."

The boat moved onward, past island after uninhabited island. This was like paradise, Rocklin thought. He could almost see himself bringing a bride to one of those islands, living off fish

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and roots for a while, getting back to the simplicities of existence after a much too complicated life.

What has that android done to me? he wondered. *He's changed me all around. Now I'm even thinking about getting married. The sly devil is turning me into a bourgeois. Like Jeff. Next thing I'll be collecting for charity drives. I—*

The storm struck without warning.

The heavens opened. Clouds parted and a torrent of rain descended. One moment it had been a warm, sunny morning; the next, they had entered a zone of violent confusion. The abrupt change in the weather caught them unprepared. A howling wind swirled down out of the north. On the distant islands, palm trees swayed and snapped.

"Get belowdecks!" Gardner yelled, as massive waves roiled around them. The little boat bobbed and swayed perilously. Ree and Lorna Gardner fled for the hatch. Old Ravenhurst followed, shouting to his daughter, who stood staring raptly out at the weltering sea.

"Terry! Terry, come away from there!"

Rocklin rose. Beneath him, the decks were heaving. The ship was like a bit of wood tossed about. He glanced at the android. Roy said, "Let's go where it's safer."

"What can happen to us here?"

"We can get washed overboard," Roy said.

"Terry!" Ravenhurst bellowed.

But the girl was caught up in the romantic wonder of the sudden storm. She stood high in the prow, eyes bright. The waves beat against the hull for a moment. Then, with a fearsome crash, the water breasted the side of the ship, swirling knee-deep on deck, splashing white foam in Rocklin's eyes.

When he could see again, the girl was gone.

"Terry!" the older man screamed.

There was a sudden splitting sound as a section of rail ripped loose at the far side of the boat and flew through the air, cracking into the android with a sickening impact. Roy swayed, then plunged to the deck and lay still. Rocklin ran to him.

"Roy! Roy, wake up! That girl's been washed overboard and you've got to get her!"

The android did not move.

Rocklin rose. There was no one else on the deck but the distraught, hysterical father. With sudden wonder, Rocklin realized that he was free of the android's bondage, at least for a while.

He leaped into the sea.

The water boiled madly around

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him. *He's out cold,* Rocklin thought. *Or dead. I can drown here. I—*

I don't want to drown! I want to live!

Where's the girl?

A wave lifted him high, then dashed him down. His lungs filled with water. He kicked and choked. As the water parted, he thought he caught sight of something large and dark just beneath the surface, something with teeth and glittering eyes a foot across. He paddled wildly, spun around, and saw the girl barely above water. Another wave tossed him to her side, and he fastened an arm tight around her. She was half drowned, and panicky.

"Relax," he heard himself saying. "Don't try to fight. Just bob, tread water. The storm's passing."

"I—I—oh, God, the water—"

"Don't talk." He tightened his grip about her and looked around for the ship. There it bobbed, no more than a hundred yards away. Rain still cascaded down, but the wind was dying away. He began to swim toward it, and then he saw Ree Gardner on deck, tossing him a line, and they were hauling him in, gasping and coughing. He handed the limp girl up to Gardner, then crawled up the ladder himself.

Then the magnitude of what he had done struck him. The habitual suicider had risked his life for another's.

Or had he? He wondered. Why had he jumped? To save the girl —or to drown himself?

Roy was at his side now. Grinning, the Companion said, "You muffed your big moment, pal. If ever you had a chance to do away with yourself, that was it. Me flat on my back out cold."

Rocklin struggled for breath. "I—I'm a blasted hero instead. Can you beat that!"

"It's hard to believe, all right."

There was something sly, something needling in the android's tone that aroused Rocklin's suspicions. He said in a low voice, "You weren't knocked out, were you? You were faking—to see if I'd save the girl or kill myself!"

"Don't be ridiculous," the android said. "If you had drowned, it would have been *my* finish too. Would I take such a risk?"

"I don't know," Rocklin said slowly. He would never know. But, deliberately or not, the android had given him a chance—a chance to surrender his own life, or a chance to buy back the life he had let perish through cowardice. Had the android been risking his own life, really? Or was he just a shrewd therapist?

It didn't matter. Rocklin's entire body trembled with the realization that the storm within him was ending. **THE END**

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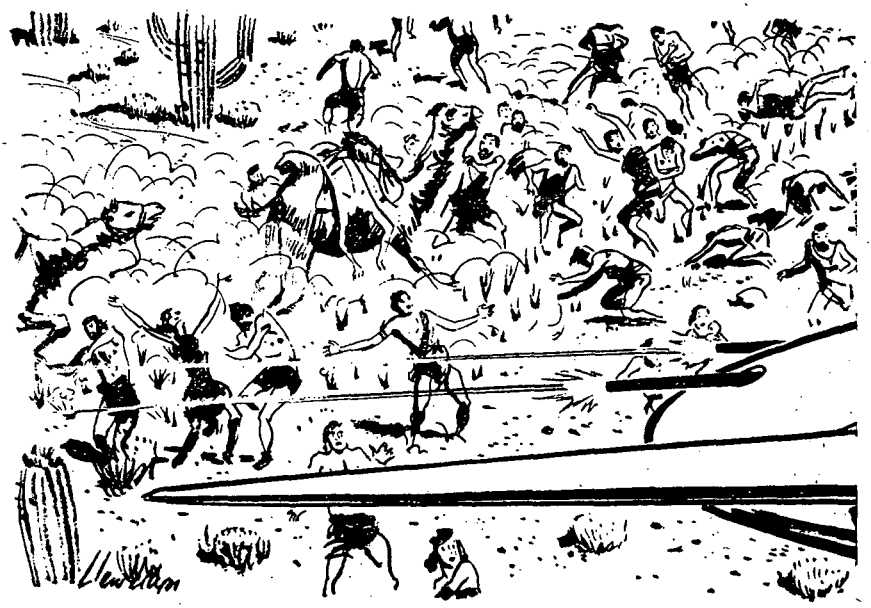
HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT IT

By ADAM CHASE

How black is the blackest treachery? Is the most callous traitor entitled to mercy? Steve pondered these questions. His decision? That at times the villain should possibly be spoken of as a hero.

ONLY the shells of deserted mud-brick houses greeted Steve Cantwell when he reached the village.

He poked around in them for a while. The desert heat was searing, parching, and the Sirian sun gleamed balefully off the blades of Steve's unicopter, which had brought him from Oasis City, almost five hundred miles away. He had remembered heat from his childhood here on Sirius'



The chance of mass slaughter

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second planet with the Earth colony, but not heat like this. It was like a magnet drawing all the moisture out of his body.

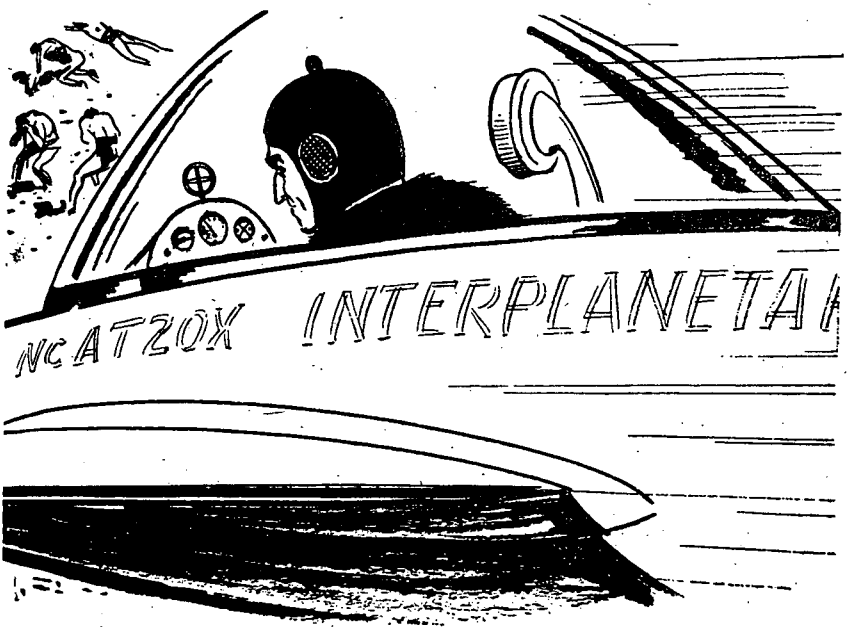
He walked among the buildings, surprise and perhaps sadness etched on his gaunt, weather-beaten face. Childhood memories flooded back: the single well from which all the families drew their water, the mud-brick house, hardly different from the others and just four walls and a roof now, in which he'd lived with his aunt after his parents had been killed in a *Kumaji* raid, the community center where he'd spent his happiest time as a boy.

He went to the well and hoisted up a pailful of water. The winch creaked as he remembered. He ladled out the water, suddenly very thirsty, and brought the ladle to his lips.

He hurled the ladle away. The water was bitter. Not brackish.

Poisoned.

He spat with fury, then kneeled and stuffed his mouth with sand, almost gagging. After a while he spat out the



was their eternal nightmare.

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sand too and opened his canteen and rinsed his mouth. His lips and mouth were paralyzed by contact with the poison. He walked quickly across the well-square to his aunt's house. Inside, it was dim but hardly cooler. Steve was sweating, the saline sweat making him blink. He scowled, not understanding. The table was set in his aunt's house. A coffeepot was on the stove and last night's partially-consumed dinner still on the table.

The well had been poisoned, the town had been deserted on the spur of the moment, and Steve had returned to his boyhood home from Earth—too late for anything.

He went outside into the square. A lizard was sunning itself and staring at him with lidless eyes. When he moved across the square, the lizard scurried away.

"Earthman!" a quavering voice called.

Steve ran toward the sound. In the scant shadow of the community center, a Kumaji was resting. He was a withered old man, all skin and bones and sweat-stiffened tunic, with enormous red-rimmed eyes. His purple skin, which had been blasted by the merciless sun, was almost black.

Steve held the canteen to his lips and watched his throat working almost spasmodically to get the water down. After a while Steve withdrew the canteen and said:

"What happened here?"

"They're gone. All gone."

"Yes, but what happened?"

"The Kumaji—"

"You're Kumaji."

"This is my town," the old man said. "I lived with the Earthmen. Now they're gone."

"But you stayed here—"

"To die," the old man said, without self-pity. "I'm too old to flee, too old to fight, too old for anything but death. More water."

Steve gave him another drink. "You still haven't told me what happened." Actually, though, Steve could guess. With the twenty-second century Earth population hovering at the eleven billion mark, colonies were sought everywhere. Even on a parched desert wasteland like this. The Kumaji tribesmen had never accepted the colony as a fact of their life on the desert, and in a way Steve could not blame them. It meant one oasis less for their own nomadic sustenance. When Steve was a boy, Kumaji raids were frequent. At

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school on Earth and Luna he'd read about the raids, how they'd increased in violence, how the Earth government, so far away and utterly unable to protect its distant colony, had suggested withdrawal from the Kumaji desert settlement, especially since a colony could exist there under only the most primitive conditions, almost like the purple-skinned Kumaji natives themselves.

"When did it happen?" Steve demanded.

"Last night." It was now midafternoon. "Three folks died," the Kumaji said in his almost perfect English, "from the poisoning of the well. The well was the last straw. The colonists had no choice. They had to go, and go fast, taking what little water they had left in the houses."

"Will they try to walk all the way through to Oasis City?" Oasis City, built at the confluence of two underground rivers which came to the surface there and flowed the rest of the way to the sea above ground, was almost five hundred miles from the colony. Five hundred miles of trackless sands and hundred-and-thirty-degree heat. . . .

"They have to," the old man said. "And they have to hurry. Men, women and children. The Kumaji are after them."

Steve felt irrational hatred then. He thought it would help if he could find some of the nomadic tribesmen and kill them. It might help the way he felt, he knew, but it certainly wouldn't help the fleeing colonists, trekking across a parched wilderness —to the safety of Oasis City —or death.

"Come on," Steve said, making up his mind. "The unicopter can hold two in a pinch."

"You're going after them?"

"I've got to. They're my people. I've been away too long."

"Say, you're young Cantwell, aren't you? Now I remember."

"Yes, I'm Steve Cantwell."

"I'm not going anyplace, young fellow."

"But you can't stay here, without any good water to drink, without—"

"I'm staying," the old man said, still without self-pity, just matter-of-factly. "The Earth folks have no room for me and I can't blame 'em. The Kumaji'll kill me for a renegade, I figure. I lived a good, long life. I've no regrets. Go after your people, young fellow. They'll need every extra

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strong right arm they can get. You got any weapons?"

"No," Steve said.

"Too bad. Well, good-bye and good luck."

"But you can't—"

"Oh, I'm staying. I want to stay. This is my home. It's the only home I'll ever have. Good luck, young fellow."

Slowly, Steve walked to his unicopter. It was nothing more than a small metal disk on which to stand, and a shaft with four turbo-blades. It could do sixty miles an hour at an elevation of two thousand feet.

Steve turned the little turbo-jet engine over, then on impulse ran back to the old man and gave him his canteen, turning away before it could be refused and striding quickly back to the unicopter and getting himself airborne without looking at the deserted village or the old man again.

The old man's voice called after him: "Tell the people . . . hurry . . . Kumaji looking for them to kill . . . desert wind ought to wipe out their trail . . . but hurry . . ."

The voice faded into the faint rushing sound of the hot desert wind. Steve gazed down on bare sun-blasted rock, on rippled dunes, on hate-haze. He circled wider and wider, seeking his people.

Hours later he spotted the caravan in the immensity of sand and wasteland. He brought the unicopter down quickly, with a rush of air and a whine of turbojets. He alighted in the sand in front of the slow-moving column. It was like something out of Earth's Middle East—and Middle Ages. They had even imported camels for their life here on the Sirian desert, deciding the Earth camel was a better beast of burden than anything the Sirius II wastelands had to offer. They walked beside the great-humped beasts of burden, the animals piled high with the swaying baggage of their belongings. They moved through the sands with agonizing slowness. Already, after only one day's travel, Steve could see that some of the people were spent and exhausted and had to ride on camelback. They had gone perhaps fifteen miles, with almost five hundred to go across searing desert, the Kumaji seeking them. . . .

"Hullo!" Steve shouted, and a man armed with an atorifle came striding clumsily through the sand toward him. "Cantwell's the name," Steve said. "I'm one of you."

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Bleak hostility in his face, the man approached. "Cantwell. Yeah, I remember you. Colony wasn't good enough for young Steve Cantwell. Oh, no. Had to go off to Earth to get himself educated. What are you doing here now on that fancy aircraft of yours, coming to crow at our wake?"

The bitterness surprised Steve. He recognized the man now as Tobias Whiting, who had been the Colony's most successful man when Steve was a boy. Except for his bitterness and for the bleak self-pity and defeat in his eyes, the years had been good to Tobias Whiting. He was probably in his mid-forties now, twenty years Steve's senior, but he was well-muscled, his flesh was solid, his step bold and strong. He was a big muscular man with a craggy, handsome face. In ten years he had hardly changed at all, while Steve Cantwell, the boy, had become Steve Cantwell the man. He had been the Colony's official trader with the Kumajis, and had grown rich—by colony standards—at his business. Now, Steve realized, all that was behind him, and he could only flee with the others—either back to the terribly crowded Earth or on in search of a new colony on some other outworld, if they could get the transportation. Perhaps that explained his bitterness.

"So you've come back, eh? You sure picked a time, Cantwell."

The refugees were still about a quarter of a mile off, coming up slowly. They hardly seemed to be moving at all. "Is my aunt all right?" Steve said. She was the only family he remembered.

Tobias Whiting shook his head slowly. "I hate to be the one to tell you this. Brace yourself for a shock. Your aunt was one of those who died from the poisoned water last night."

For a long moment, Steve said nothing. The only emotion he felt was pity—pity for the hard life his aunt had lived, and the hard death. Sadness would come later, if there was to be a time for sadness.

The caravan reached them then. The first person Steve saw was a girl. She wore the shroud-like desert garment and her face—it would be a pretty face under other circumstances, Steve realized—was etched with lines of fatigue. Steve did not recognize her. "Who is he, Dad?" the girl said.

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"Young Cantwell. Remember?"

So this was Mary Whiting, Steve thought. Why, she'd been a moppet ten years ago! How old? Ten years old maybe. The years crowded him suddenly. She was a woman now. . . .

"Steve Cantwell?" Mary said. "Of course I remember. Hello, Steve. I—I'm sorry you had to come back at a time like this. I'm sorry about your aunt. If there's anything I can do . . ."

Steve shook his head, then shook the hand she offered him. She was a slim, strong girl with a firm handshake. Her concern for him at a time like this was little short of amazing, especially since it was completely genuine.

He appreciated it.

Tobias Whiting said: "Shame of it is, Cantwell, some of us could get along with the Kumaji. I had a pretty good business here, you know that." He looked with bitterness at the dusty file of refugees. "But I never got a credit out of it. Wherever we wind up, my girl and I will be poor again. We could have been rich."

Steve asked, "What happened to all your profits?"

"Tied up with a Kumaji moneylender, but thanks to what happened I'll never see it again."

Mary winced, as if her father's words and his self-pity were painful to her. Then others came up and a few minutes were spent in back-pounding and hand-shaking as some of the men who had been boys with Steve came up to recognize and be recognized. Their greeting was warm, as Tobias Whiting's had been cool. Despite the knowledge of what lay behind all of them, and what still lay ahead, it was a little like homecoming.

But Steve liked Mary Whiting's warm, friendly smile best of all. It was comforting and reassuring.

Three days later, Tobias Whiting disappeared.

The caravan had been making no more than ten or fifteen miles a day. Their water supply was almost gone but on the fourth day they hoped to reach an oasis in the desert. Two of the older folks had died of fatigue. A third was critically ill and there was little that could be done for him. The food supply was running short, but they could always slaughter their camels for food and make their way to Oasis City, still four hundred and some miles away,

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with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

And then, during the fourth night, Tobias Whiting disappeared, taking Steve's unicopter. A sentry had heard the low muffled whine of the turbojets during the night and had seen the small craft take off, but had assumed Steve had taken it up for some reason. Each day Steve had done so, reconnoitering for signs of the Kumaji.

"But why?" someone asked. "Why?"

At first there was no answer. Then a woman whose husband had died the day before said: "It's no secret Whiting has plenty of money —with the Kumaji."

None of them looked at Mary. She stood there defiantly, not saying anything, and Steve squeezed her hand.

"Now, wait a minute," one of Whiting's friends said.

"Wait, nothing." This was Jeremy Gort, who twice had been mayor of the colony. "I know how Whiting's mind works. He slaved all his life for that money, that's the way he'll see it. Cantwell, didn't you say the Kumaji were looking for us, to kill us?"

"That's what I was told," Steve said.

"All right," Gort went on relentlessly. "Then this is what I figure must have happened. Whiting got to brooding over his lost fortune and finally decided he had to have it. So, he went off at night in Cantwell's 'copter, determined to get it. Only catch is, folks, if I know the Kumaji, they won't just give it to him—not by a long sight."

"No?" someone asked.

"No sir. They'll trade. For our location. And if Whiting went off like that without even saying good-bye to his girl here, my guess is he'll make the trade." His voice reflected some bitterness.

Mary went to Gort and slapped his face. The elderly man did not even blink. "Well," he asked her gently, "did your pa tell you he was going?"

"N-no," Mary said. There were tears in her eyes, but she did not cry.

Gort turned to Steve. "Cantwell, can he get far in that 'copter?"

Steve shook his head. "Ten or fifteen miles is all. Almost out of fuel, Mr. Gort. You saw how I took her up for only a quick mile swing each day. He won't get far."

"He'll crash in the desert?"

"Crash or crash-land," Steve said.

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Mary sobbed, and bit her lip, and was silent.

"We've got to stop him," Gort said. "And fast. If he gets to the Kumaji, they'll send down a raiding party and we'll be finished. We could never fight them off without the protection of our village. Near as I can figure, there's a Kumaji base fifty miles due north of here. Whiting knows it too, so that's where he'll be going, I figure. Can't spare more than a couple of men to look for him, though, in case the Kumaji find us—or are led to us—and attack."

Steve said, "I should have taken something out of the 'copter every night, so it couldn't start. I'll go."

Mary came forward boldly. "I have to go. He's my father. If he crashed out there, he may be hurt. He may be—dying."

Gort looked at her. "And if he's trying to sell us out to the Kumajis?"

"Then—then I'll do whatever Steve asks me to. I promise."

"That's good enough for me," Steve said.

A few minutes later, armed with atorifles and their share of the food and water that was left, Steve and Mary set out northward across the sand while the caravan continued east. Fear of what they might find mounted.

The first night, they camped in the lee of low sandhills. The second night they found a small spring with brackish but drinkable water. On the third day, having covered half the distance to the Kumaji settlement, they began to encounter Kumaji patrols, on foot or *thlotback*, the six-legged desert animals running so swiftly over the sands and so low to the ground that they almost seemed to be gliding. Steve and Mary hardly spoke. Talk was unnecessary. But slowly a bond grew between them. Steve liked this slim silent girl who had come out here with him risking her life although she must have known deep in her heart that her father had almost certainly decided to turn traitor in order to regain his fortune.

On the fourth day, they spotted the unicopter from a long way off and made their way toward it. It had come much further than Steve had expected. With sinking heart he realized that Tobias Whiting, if he escaped the crash-landing without injury, must surely have reached the Kumaji encampment by now.

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"It doesn't seem badly damaged," Mary said.

The platform had buckled slightly, the 'copter was tilted over, one of the rotors twisted, its end buried in sand. Tobias Whiting wasn't there.

"No," Steve said. "It's hardly damaged at all. Your father got out of it all right."

"To go—to them?"

"I think so, Mary. I don't want to pass judgment until we're sure. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Steve! Steve! What will we do? What *can* we do?"

"Find him, if it isn't too late. Come on."

"North?"

"North."

"And if by some miracle we find him?"

Steve said nothing. The answer—capture or death—was obvious. But you couldn't tell that to a traitor's daughter, could you?

As it turned out, they did not find Tobias Whiting through their own efforts. Half an hour after setting out from the unicopter, they were spotted by a roving band of Kumajis, who came streaking toward them on their *thlots*. Mary raised her atorifle, but Steve struck the barrel aside. "They'd kill us," he said. "We can only surrender."

They were hobbled and led painfully across the sand. They were taken that way to a small Kumaji encampment, and thrust within a circular tent.

Tobias Whiting was in there.

"Mary!" he cried. "My God! Mary . . ."

"We came for you, Dad," she said coldly. "To stop you. To . . . to kill you if necessary."

"Mary . . ."

"Oh, Dad, why did you do it? Why?"

"We couldn't start all over again, could we? You have a right to live the sort of life I planned for you. You . . ."

"Whiting," Steve said, "did you tell them yet?"

"No. No, I haven't. I have information to trade, sure. But I want to make sure it's going to the right people. I want to get our . . ."

"Dad! Our money, and all those deaths?"

"It doesn't matter now. I—I had changed my mind, Mary. Truly. But now, now that you're a prisoner, what if I don't talk? Don't you see, they'll torture you. They'll make you talk. And that way—we get nothing. I couldn't stand to see them hurt you."

"They can do—what they think they have to do. I'll tell them nothing."

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"You won't have to," Whiting said. "I'll tell them when we reach the larger settlement. They're taking us there tomorrow, they told me."

"Then we've got to get out of here tonight," Steve said.

The low sun cast the shadow of their guard against the *thlot*skin wall of their tent. He was a single man, armed with a long, pike-like weapon. When darkness came, if the guard were not increased. . . .

They were brought a pasty gruel for their supper, and ate in silence and distaste, ate because they needed the strength. Mary said, "Dad, I don't want you to tell them anything. Dad, please. If you thought you were doing it for me . . ."

"I've made up my mind," Tobias Whiting said.

Mary turned to Steve, in despair. "Steve," she said. "Steve. Do—whatever you have to do. I—I'll understand."

Steve didn't answer her. Wasn't Whiting right now? he thought. If Steve silenced him, wouldn't the Kumaji torture them for the information? Steve could stand up to it perhaps—but he couldn't stand to see them hurt Mary. He'd talk if they did that. . . .

Then silencing Whiting wasn't the answer. But the Kumajis had one willing prisoner and two unwilling ones. They knew that. If the willing one yelled for help but the yelling was kept to a minimum so only one guard, the man outside, came. . . .

Darkness in the Kumaji encampment.

Far off, a lone tribesman singing a chant old as the desert.

"Are you asleep?" Mary asked.

"No," Steve said.

"Dad is. Listen to the way he's breathing—like a baby. As if—as if he wasn't going to betray all our people. Oh, I hate him, I hate him!"

Steve crawled to where the older man was sleeping. Tobias Whiting's voice surprised him. "I'm not asleep. I was thinking. I—"

"I'm going to kill you," Steve said very softly, and sprang at Whiting. He paused, though. It was a calculated pause, and Whiting cried out as Steve had hoped he would. Then his hands found the older man's throat and closed there—not to kill him but to keep him from crying out again.

Sand stirred, the tentflap lifted, and a bulky figure rushed inside. Steve got up, met him halfway, felt the

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jarring contact of their bodies. The pike came up dimly in the darkness, the point scraping against Steve's ribs as the guard lunged awkwardly. Steve's fingers sought the thick-muscled neck, clamped there—squeezing.

The guard writhed. His feet drummed the sand. With one hand he stabbed out wildly with the unwieldy pike. There was a cry from Mary and the guard managed a low squawking noise. Outside, the rest of the camp seemed undisturbed. There was death in Steve's strong tightening fingers. There had to be death there. Death for the Kumaji guard—or death for the fleeing Earthmen, who had lost one colony and must seek another.

They fell together on the sand, the guard still struggling. Steve couldn't release his throat to grab the pike. The guard stabbed out awkwardly, blindly with it, kicking up sand. Then Tobias Whiting moaned, but Steve hardly heard him.

When the guard's legs stopped drumming, Steve released him. The man was either dead or so close to death that he would be out for hours. Steve had never killed a man before, had never in violence and with intent to kill attacked a man. . . .

"Steve!"

It was Mary, calling his name and crying.

"It's Dad. Dad was—hit. The pike, a wild stab. He's hit bad—"

Steve crawled over to them. It was very dark. He could barely make out Tobias Whiting's pain-contorted face.

"My stomach," Whiting said, gasping for breath. "The pain . . ."

Steve probed with his hands, found the wound. Blood was rushing out. He couldn't stop it and he knew it and he thought Whiting knew it too. He touched Mary's hand, and held it. Mary sobbed against him, crying softly.

"You two . . ." Whiting gasped. "You two . . . Mary, Mary girl. Is—he—what you want?"

"Yes, Dad. Oh, yes!"

"You can get her out of here, Cantwell?"

"I think so," Steve said.

Then go. Go while you can. I'll tell them—due south. The Earthmen are heading due south. They'll go—south. They won't find the caravan. You'll—all—get away. If it's—what you want, Mary."

She leaned away from Steve, kissing her father. She

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asked Steve: "Isn't there anything we can do for him?"

Steve shook his head. "But he's got to live long enough to tell them, to deceive them."

"I'll live long enough," Whiting said, and Steve knew then that he would. "Luck to —all of you. From a—very foolish—man . . ."

Steve took Mary's hand and pulled her out into the hot, dark, wind-blown night. He carried the dead Kumaji's pike and they slipped across the sand to where the *thlots* were hobbled for the night. He hardly remembered the rest of it. There was violence and death, but necessary death. He killed a man with the pike, and unhobbled one of the *thlots*. The animal screamed and two more Kumajis came sleepily through the night to see what was the matter. With the long edge of the pike's blade he decapitated one of them. He slammed the shaft of the weapon across the other's face, probably breaking his jaw. The camp was in a turmoil. In the darkness he flung Mary on the *thlot's* bare back in front of him, and they glided off across the sand.

Pursuit was disorganized—and unsuccessful. It was too dark for effective pursuit, as Steve had hoped it would be. They rode swiftly all night and continued riding with the dawn. They could have gone in any direction. The wind-driven sand would obliterate their trail.

Two days later they reached the caravan. As they rode up, Mary said, "Steve, do you have to tell them?"

"We can tell them this," Steve said. "Your father died a hero's death, sending the Kumajis off in the wrong direction."

"And not—not what he'd planned to do at first."

"No. We'll tell them that was his intention all the while. A man can make a mistake, can't he?"

"I love you, Steve. I love you."

Then they rode down on the caravan. Somehow Steve knew they would all reach Oasis City in safety.

With Mary he would find a new world out in the vastness of space.

THE END

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THE LAVENDER TALENT

By GERALD VANCE

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

When the Martian works of art arrived on earth, the competition to possess them was a matter of pride. Later it became a matter of life and death.

WHEN Dr. Split threw open the windows, he saw that it was a fine, crisp morning, with delicious zephyrs hurtling off the bay. He opened the top of his pajamas, set the dial on his chest for "FULL" and breathed deeply of the Chicago air.

It had all the earmarks of a rewarding day. There was bacon sizzling in the autochef, and his wife, Parka, could be heard in the kitchen, making bustling, housewife noises. There were wild sprays of forsythia already in the garden, promising warmer days. He was feeling strong, and whole, and younger than his forty years.

And then there was the Shipment.

Dr. Split chuckled happily at the thought, and the effort was too much for the mechanical lung which ordered his breathing. He coughed loudly, and fumbled for the dial.

He was fine by the time Parka came into the bedroom, solicitous as always.

"Are you all right?" she said. There was a "V" in the middle of her forehead, permanently engraved since the day her husband returned in the hospital ship from Mars.

"Perfectly." He smiled at her, his face boyish even under the mane of white hair. Then he shook his head like a despairing parent. "I'll admit it's warmer," he said, frowning to hide his amusement. "But hardly *that* warm, my dear—"

She looked down at herself. She was naked.

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"Oh, damn," Parka said. "I'll never get used to the temperatures you like, Freddy." He continued to frown, so she sighed and picked up a diaphanous nightgown from the bed. Parka had been a native of Byrd, in the Arctic Circle, before she had met and married her husband.

"I was just thinking about the Shipment," Dr. Split said.

"Well, don't, if it makes you ill—"

"It doesn't make me ill. It makes me feel wonderful!"

He came over to her. "If I could make you understand," he said. "The importance! The miracle of it! I go to bed every night with a prayer of thanks to that Michaelson crew for discovering it. What a treasure, Parka!"

She patted his cheek indulgently. "You're a treasure," she said. "Come and eat, curator."

"I plan to have the official exhibition next week, but if you'd like a sneak preview—"

She took him by the hand and led him into the kitchen. "No, thanks," she said. "I've seen pictures of those monstrosities—"

"Monstrosities?" He was horrified. "Parka, this statuary will be the *piece de resistance* of the Galactic Museum—"

"You said that about the Venusian mollusks," she reminded. "Will this be enough bacon?"

"The Lavenders will make beachcomber's trophies out of the mollusks—"

"The what?" She set the toaster dial for "buttered."

"The Lavenders," Dr. Split said. "That's my unofficial name for them." He looked embarrassed. "They're lavender, you see."

"Why, that's very pretty, Freddy. How do you want your coffee?"

"Ecuador," Dr. Split said. "You see, you really can't judge the pieces by the news photos you saw. First of all, they were telephotoed from space, and that always distorts them. And the color was all wrong. They're really splendid examples of—well, they're at least evidence that there *were* inhabitants on the planet. And cultured inhabitants at that."

"I'll never understand these things," Parka said. "So much fuss and feathers about bits of fungus and rocks—"

"Hardly bits," Dr. Split laughed. "The Lavenders average eight to nine feet tall. Three of them are almost twelve feet. And they're beau-

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Undisturbed by death, the artifact gleamed in unearthly beauty.

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tiful! Lovely! Great, twisted things of this exquisite petrified mineral. Why, do you realize—" he leaned forward enthusiastically, and Parka managed to slip the coffee cup out of harm's way—"that the average weight of the pieces is four *tons?*" He paused for reaction, but Parka's mind was elsewhere.

"You don't suppose Worthington will be any trouble?" she asked distantly.

He blinked. "Worthington? Of course not. But as I was telling you—the Lavenders have been compared to the megaliths of Easter Island. It's still an anthropologic mystery how—" He stopped. "Why should Worthington be any trouble?"

"I don't know. I read something about it on the newsprinter this morning. About some claim of his."

"Claim? What claim?"

"I really don't *know*, darling. Didn't you tell me once that he had filed for the pieces with the Bureau of Specimens and Fossils?"

Dr. Split shrugged. "Well, yes, but what museum in the country hasn't? After all, there's been nothing like this since the Rosetta stone. But the Galactic has first claim on interplanetary specimens and artifacts."

"Well, that's good," Parka said comfortably. "You know what happens to Ecuador coffee when it gets cold," she chided.

Dr. Split gulped it. "Worthington!" he chuckled. "That old pirate—"

"Don't talk while you're drinking."

"He makes me laugh. He's a comic-strip curator. *Ars gratia artis—*"

"That's not very nice," his wife said primly.

"The National Museum of Art isn't a museum. It's a mausoleum—"

"You better get dressed," Parka said.

Her husband shot a look at his watch, nodded agreement, and hurried into the bedroom.

He made happy, splashing noises in the bath, and was out again in half an hour, ready for the day. He kissed Parka briskly on the cheek, and went out the door.

When he was gone, she slipped out of her nightgown and tossed it idly on a kitchen chair. Then she padded over the soft rugs to the foyer, and picked up the dangling sheets of newsprint in the machine. Before she tossed them away, she looked again for the item which had

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caught her wandering attention that morning.

She found it in Section Seven.

"Dr. August Worthington, Curator of the National Museum of Art, has started proceedings in the U. S. Supreme Court for possession of the eight recently-discovered relics of Martian civilization, unearthed by an expeditionary force led by Col. Jacob Michaelson. Dr. Worthington's appeal will be based upon the contention that the eight works of sculpture constitute 'examples of art and culture' as opposed to 'specimens and artifacts,' and therefore belong in the National Art Museum rather than the Galactic Museum to which they have been currently assigned."

Steerforth was waiting for Dr. Split in the curator's office. His little round body was quivering with excitement.

"Dr. Split! Thank God!" he spluttered. "What a morning to be late! Oh, that man!"

Dr. Split laughed. "What man?" He circled the desk and took his chair, his hands diving automatically into the accumulation of mail.

"What man? Worthington, of course!" The curator's aide flapped about the desk like a bird with a broken wing. "He won't stop at anything, you know. Unscrupulous. Completely unscrupulous!"

"You're getting overwrought about nothing."

"I'm glad you're so confident." The little man wrung his hands. "When I think of the expense! The brass plates alone will cost the Museum three thousand dollars. We're stretching our budget the way it is. And the repairs we made in Wing E to accommodate the things—"

"Randolph!" Dr. Split looked up sharply. "Haven't you got other things to do? Everything must be ready. We'll be uncrating the specimens in ten minutes."

"Will we?" Steerforth groaned. "Do you really think we should? If we left them crated and returned them to Customs, we could save the shipping charges—"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Well, just until they make a ruling—"

"Ruling?" Dr. Split's lean face went white. "What's happened, Randolph?"

Steerforth told him. Dr. Split took the news stoically, but swore at himself for not listening to Parka's words that morning.

He slammed his fist into

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his palm. "We'll fight!" he said.

"What can we do? It's up to the Legal Computor. Worthington would never have made such a decision if he didn't think he could win. You know how cautious he is."

"They can't have our Lavenders!" Dr. Split thundered. He came around the desk and towered over his aide. "They belong to us!"

Steerforth cowered. "I know, Doctor. But it's out of our hands—"

"We're nothing without them! A rotten collection of pebbles and sponges and dry bones! The Lavenders will *make* this Museum, Randolph!"

The little man looked mournful. The curator glared at him, and then dropped a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Let's open the crates," he said.

When the first Lavender was free of its wooden prison, the curator, his aide, Jenny, the Museum secretary, and even the two workmen stood back from the monument with conspicuous awe.

"Lord, Lord!" Dr. Split breathed.

"Oh, dear!" Steerforth said.

"Gosh!" said Jenny.

"Holy cats!" said one of the workmen. The other's remark was unprintable.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" The curator's eyes were large.

"Yes, yes it is," Steerforth agreed.

"Gives me the creeps," Jenny said.

It was some nine feet high. It began in a tortuously-twisted knotted mass, and rose in sweeping, twisting curves, towards the ceiling. It was smooth, slippery as glass, breathtakingly b a l a n c e d, shockingly lavender.

"What is it?" the first workman asked.

"What's the difference?" Jenny said. She stepped towards the thing, hypnotically. Her hand went out.

"Don't touch it!" Dr. Split cried. She leaped back. "I don't want anyone touching it," he said sternly. "It's an alien thing. We don't know anything about it. Remember the Venusian mollusk?"

"Ugh!" Jenny said expressively. She rubbed the back of her plump hand, remembering the vivid rash.

"You want we should open the others?" the second workman said.

"Yes, please!" Steerfort told him.

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He picked up the crowbar. But he had barely inserted it into the frame of the second crate, when clacking footsteps sounded behind them on the marble floor of the Museum.

The group turned at the sound. There were three men coming towards them, like the vanguard of an advancing army.

"Worthington!" Steerforth gasped.

The man at the head of the three-man wedge came to a clicking halt. He wore a gray pin-striped suit, with a modest carnation in the buttonhole. His silvery hair was carefully brushed, and his small neat moustache was freshly waxed.

"Ah!" he said. He whipped off his gloves and bowed to the two men behind him. "Zimmer. Craven." He turned to Dr. Split. "Of Zimmer, Craven, and Zimmer. My attorneys."

Split spoke harshly. "What do you want here, Worthington?"

"Ah," Worthington said. He looked past the curator at the first Lavender. He removed a pair of eyeglasses from the breast pocket of his coat, and slipped them on. He came closer to the specimen, peered at it, leaned back, peered at it again, and then removed the spectacles and replaced them.

"Lovely!" he said.

"I don't recall inviting you," Dr. Split said.

"I merely assumed." Worthington nodded towards the little assistant. "After I spoke to you this morning—"

"Randolph!" The curator looked furious, and Steerforth's head ducked into his collar.

"I merely wanted to find out," Worthington said very smoothly, "whether you were going ahead as planned. After everything, that is."

"You have no right to these specimens," Dr. Split raged. "That's been settled, Worthington! They're Galactic property!"

The lawyer called Zimmer, a dry stick of a man with bloodless lips, said: "They're works of art, Dr. Split. Not archaeological curiosities."

"Exactly," his partner said.

"The Martians were artists," Worthington told his audience. "They had a great talent. The Lavender Talent, I call it. I have a little piece about it in the forthcoming Art News. You must read it, Dr. Split. It may, er—broaden your outlook."

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Split took a step forward.

"Look, Worthington. I'm not going to trade arguments with you. Make it a court battle, if you want to. But I think you'll lose."

"Really?" He looked bored.

"Yes. I think you'll lose because of one factor. The Unknown Quantity—"

"Which means what?"

"Which means the rash that infected everyone who touched the Venusian mollusks. The poisonous seed of the Mercurian water-flower. The wild growth factor of the Martian lichen—"

"Oh, that," the art curator said. "You've got a hundred examples of harmless extra-terrestrial specimens. Don't you, Doctor? I've been through your little museum. These do not belong here."

"You're not dealing with *objets d'art!*" Dr. Split said violently. "You're dealing with alien things!" He coughed in an alarming explosion, and Jenny gripped his arm in concern.

"Be careful—" she said.

"I'm all right!" he answered angrily.

He sat down weakly on the folding chair quickly supplied by his aide. When he recovered his normal breathing function, he spoke again:

"This lung of mine's a good example, Worthington," he said wryly. "That's what I got for scrambling around an alien world—"

"I'm sorry," Worthington said gently. "But it's really beside the point . . ."

He went to the imposing Lavender again. His hand slid over the smooth, shining surface. Split made no effort to warn him away.

"A great talent," Worthington said reverently.

When Dr. Split arrived home that night, he found Parka in tears.

"What is it, sweetie?" he asked.

There was an opened box on her lap. She jammed a sheet of paper onto the pile, and snapped the lid shut.

"It's nothing," she said, wiping her eyes. "Just wanted a good cry." She placed the box on the table. "I was doing some cleaning. I ran across your letters from Mars."

He squeezed her hand. "That's all over, honey."

"I know." She looked at him mistily. "It was all so terrible. The accident. I never thought you'd come out of it—" An overflow was threatened again, and Dr. Split placed a noisy kiss on her eyelid.

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"Cheer up," he said. "I'm fine now. And hungry!"

"Dinner's in the autochef. Is venison all right?"

"Venison is fine."

At the dinner table, Parka's mood brightened. But as her husband recounted the events of his day, he grew more and more downcast, and their roles were reversed.

"Please don't let it worry you," she said. "I'm sure it will work out, Freddy."

"But it's our first *real* exhibit. It would *establish* the Museum—make it more than a collection of freaks—"

"Your attendance isn't bad."

"It's getting worse. How many tax dollars will the government spend on a flop project—"

Parka was firm. "It's not a flop!"

"Sometimes I think the Galactic Museum was started for my benefit only," Dr. Split said broodingly. "A nice, safe, government slot for broken-down archaeologists . . ."

"Freddy!"

"Well, let's face it, Parka! I'm not much good for anything but a desk now. I thought the Museum would be a real contribution—something to make the world universe-minded—"

"It is, Freddy! It is!"

"No. It might be—with the Lavenders. However, without them—"

In the hallway, the newsprinter chimed softly.

They looked at each other.

"A bulletin," Parka said.

Dr. Split put down his fork, and went into the hallway. When he returned to the table, there was a sheet of newsprint in his hand, torn jaggedly from the machine.

His face was pale. He read the words aloud.

". . . *Supreme Court Master Legal Computor announces result of decision in the case of National Museum of Art vs. National Galactic Museum . . . in favor of plaintiff . . . court order to transfer Martian specimens to Washington . . .*"

The paper fluttered from his fingers. He sat down, breathing heavily.

"Freddy—"

"No," Dr. Split said. He stared at nothing, and then the breath rasped in his throat.

"Freddy!" Parka shouted.

His fingers fumbled with his shirt button. He adjusted the dial on his chest.

He was better in a moment. But when he looked into Parka's face, there was a dis-

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turbing glint in his dark eyes.

"I'm going to the Museum," he said.

"But it's after seven—"

"Steerforth will be there. I must see them. I must!"

"But what good would it do?"

"I don't know! But I want to see them, Parka!"

She touched his white hair.

"I'll get your coat."

He entered the Museum half an hour later, feeling that insidious chill of loneliness peculiar to public places deserted after dark. There was moonlight slanting through the high windows, and the light falling on the strange exhibits was eerie, and provocative of mystic thoughts.

There was a slit of warm light beneath the door of his office, where his loyal aide would be sitting amidst a pile of unfinished paper work.

His footsteps were loud on the floor as he approached.

"Randolph?" He pushed the door open.

The office was empty.

"Randolph! Where the blazes are you?"

He made a search of the only other executive office in the Museum, and then hurried through the corridors, searching for his assistant.

He finally located him in Wing E.

Steerforth was lying on his back in front of the first Lavender, his little round stomach protruding comically. His eyeglasses were a foot from his head, and his mouth was open.

"Randolph!"

Dr. Split bent over him, and felt a shiver of horror as he appraised the stillness of the figure, the lack of breath from the opened mouth. He put his head to the little man's chest, and listened for the thump which could indicate life. There was none.

Poor Steerforth! Was it a heart attack?

The moon was white and round behind the Lavender, and its shadow knifed across the two men on the Museum floor. Dr. Split looked up at it, and felt the presence of peril.

He got to his feet, backed away from the alien object, and then took a hesitant step towards it.

There was something wrong. But what?

His hand went out, and touched the slippery surface.

It was warm!

He pulled his hand away as if from fire.

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Then he knew what was wrong. The Lavender had *changed.*

Subtly, strangely, the contours had altered; the great twisting planes had taken new courses. It was different; metamorphosed; like some giant animal that had shifted about in the throes of sleep.

But that was impossible. It was stone. Petrified!

Or was it?

He looked again at the body of Steerforth. Was it a trick of the moonlight—or was there a terrible bruise around the little man's throat? A horrible reddening where a slippery tentacle might have—

His eyes went back to the Lavender.

It was moving!

Dr. Split shrieked, and the cry was quickly silenced by the stoppage of air in his windpipe. He gasped, choked out a wordless plea for help, and fell forward into darkness.

Suddenly, there was Parka.

"Look out!" he cried at her.

"It's all right, Freddy." She spoke soothingly, in quiet, hospital tones. His eyes surveyed the white room. There was daylight in the window.

"Steerforth—" he said.

"I'm afraid he's dead. The shock must have been terrible for you. Your lungs—"

He tried to sit up, and felt another hand on his shoulder. It was Jenny, her broad face sad.

"You're okay now, Dr. Split. You gave us a scare."

"What time is it?"

"Five o'clock," Parka said. Her eyes were blurred.

"The Museum. The Lavenders—"

"They're gone, Freddy."

"What?"

Now Jenny spoke bitterly. "Worthington didn't waste any time. They called for them this morning at nine. Not half an hour after they took poor Mr. Steerforth . . ." She dissolved into tears at the thought of it.

"We've got to warn them," Dr. Split said wildly. "They are dangerous. They killed Randolph!"

Parka looked unhappy. "Oh, Freddy."

"You've just had a bad dream," Jenny said softly, stabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. "You've been saying that since they brought you in."

"But it's true—"

"Worthington was here," Parka said. "He said you were delirious—that you dreamed the whole thing up,

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just to—to stop him from taking possession . . ."

"They're alive!" Dr. Split screamed. "They're living things! They're not monuments at all!"

He looked at their faces, and recognized the disbelief he would receive from unkinder sources.

"But they *are* alive," he muttered, shaking his head. He leaned back on the pillow. "They're not Martian art at all. I think they're . . . the Martians themselves . . ."

Dr. August Worthington shook the hand of the Latin gentleman with the gray goatee and beamed.

"My pleasure, sir, my pleasure," he said.

"No, really enjoyed it," the man said. "Don't care much for museums. Found this rather interesting."

"I thank you, Signor le Presidente," Worthington said. "Thank you." He bowed charmingly to the rest of the delegation. They echoed their leader's congratulations to the curator, and departed.

Wilson, his assistant, offered his own congratulations.

"A decided triumph," Worthington agreed.

They passed the Lavender exhibit.

"I never tire of looking at them," Worthington said. "I seem to discover new beauty in them every day. A sort of ever-changing loveliness."

Worthington paused in front of them. "That one on the end, for instance. Doesn't it look—well, changed?"

"I hadn't noticed it."

"Mmm." Worthington studied it, then shrugged. "Well, back to work. I'm afraid I have some papers to clear up, but you can leave anytime."

Wilson put on his topcoat. "Good night, Wilson."

But when he was alone behind the polished desk of his office, Curator Worthington sat motionlessly before the documents that required his attention, lost in a reverie, savoring again the praises of the dignitaries who had visited the museum that day, thinking what a fine fellow he was. When he heard what he thought was a knock on the panelled oak door of his office, he called out a cheerful "Come in!" before he remembered that the museum was deserted.

Even as the twisting, hulking thing was upon him, a faint smile of satisfaction was on Worthington's face, until it was replaced by the stony grimace of death.

THE END

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Don't know where to go on your vacation? Here are some excellent suggestions. You can link up for two weeks with the mercury thought-pools of Kish. Or attend an endocrine-gala with the latest Aphrodite of Venus. Or, if you have lots of time, you can take out a . . .

PASSPORT TO ETERNITY

By J. G. BALLARD

IT was half past love on New Day in Zenith and the clocks were striking heaven. All over the city the sounds of revelry echoed upwards into the dazzling Martian night, but high on Sunset Ridge, among the mansions of the rich, Margot and Clifford Gorrell faced each other in glum silence.

Frowning, Margot flipped impatiently through the vacation brochure on her lap, then tossed it away with an elaborate gesture of despair.

"But Clifford, why do we have to go to the same place every summer? I'd like to do something interesting for a change. This year the Lovatts are going to the Venus Fashion Festival, and Bobo and Peter Anders have just booked into the fire beaches at Saturn. They'll all have a wonderful time, while we're quietly taking the last boat to nowhere."

Clifford Gorrell nodded impassively, one hand cupped over the sound control in the arm of his chair. They had been arguing all evening, and Margot's voice threw vivid sparks of irritation across the walls and ceiling. Grey and mottled, they would take days to drain.

"I'm sorry you feel like that, Margot. Where would you like to go?"

Margot shrugged scornfully, staring out at the corona of a million neon signs that illuminated the city below. "Does it matter?"

"Of course. You arrange the vacation this time."

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Margot hesitated, one eye keenly on her husband. Then she sat forward happily, turning up her fluorescent violet dress until she glowed like an Algolian ray-fish.

CLIFFORD, I've got a wonderful idea! Yesterday I was down in the Colonial Bazaar, thinking about our holiday, when I found a small dream bureau that's just been opened. Something like the Dream Dromes in Neptune City everyone was crazy about two or three years ago, but instead of having to plug into whatever program happens to be going you have your own dream plays specially designed for you."

Clifford continued to nod, carefully increasing the volume of the sound-sweeper.

"They have their own studios and send along a team of analysts and writers to interview us and afterwards book a sanatorium anywhere we like for the convalescence. Eve Corbusier and I decided a small party of five or six would be best."

"Eve Corbusier," Clifford repeated. He smiled thinly to himself and switched on the book he had been reading. "I wondered when that gorgon was going to appear."

"Eve isn't too bad when you get to know her, darling," Margot told him. "Don't start reading yet. She'll think up all sorts of weird ideas for the play." Her voice trailed off. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Clifford said wearily. "It's just that I sometimes wonder if you have any sense of responsibility at all." As Margot's eyes darkened he went on. "Do you really think that I, a supreme court justice, could take that sort of vacation, even if I wanted to? Those dream plays are packed with advertising commercials and all sort of corrupt material." He shook his head sadly. "And I told you not to go into the Colonial Bazaar."

"What are we going to do then?" Margot asked coldly. "Another honeyMoon?"

"I'll reserve a couple of singles tomorrow. Don't worry, you'll enjoy it." He clipped the hand microphone into his book and began to scan the pages with it, listening to the small metallic voice.

Margot stood up, the vanes in her hat quivering furiously. "Clifford!" she snapped, her voice dead and menacing. "I warn you, I'm not going on another honeyMoon!"

Absently, Clifford said: "Of course, dear," his fingers racing over the volume control.

"Clifford!"

Her shout sank to an angry squeak. She stepped over to him, her dress blazing like a dragon,

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jabbering at him noiselessly, the sounds sucked away through the vents over her head and pumped out across the echoing rooftops of the midnight city.

AS he sat back quietly in his private vacuum, the ceiling shaking occasionally when Margot slammed a door upstairs, Clifford looked out over the brilliant diadem of down-town Zenith. In the distance, by the space-port, the ascending arcs of hyperliners flared across the sky while below the countless phosphorescent trajectories of hopcabs enclosed the bowl of rooflight in a dome of glistening hoops.

Of all the cities of the galaxy, few offered such a wealth of pleasures as Zenith, but to Clifford Gorrell it was as distant and unknown as the first Gomorrah. At 35 he was a thin-faced, prematurely aging man with receding hair and a remote abstracted expression, and in the dark sombre suit and stiff white dog-collar which were the traditional uniform of the Probate Department's senior administrators he looked like a man who had never taken a holiday in his life.

At that moment Clifford wished he hadn't. He and Margot had never been able to agree about their vacations. Clifford's associates and superiors at the Department, all of them ten or twenty years older than himself, took their pleasures conservatively and expected a young but responsible justice to do the same. Margot grudgingly acknowledged this, but her friends who frequented the chic playtime clinics along the beach at Mira Mira considered the so-called honeyMoon trips back to Earth derisively old-fashioned a last desperate resort of the aged and infirmed.

And to tell the truth, Clifford realized, they were right. He had never dared to admit to Margot that he too was bored because it would have been more than his peace of mind was worth, but a change might do them good.

He resolved—next year.

MARGOT lay back among the cushions on the terrace divan, listening to the flamingo trees singing to each other in the morning sunlight. Twenty feet below, in the high-walled garden, a tall muscular young man was playing with a jet-ball. He had a dark olive complexion and swarthy good looks, and oil gleamed across his bare chest and arms. Margot watched with malicious amusement his efforts to entertain her. This was Trantino, Margot's play-boy, who chaperoned her during Clifford's long absences at the Probate Department.

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"Hey, Margot! Catch!" He gestured with the jet-ball but Margot turned away, feeling her swim-suit slide pleasantly across her smooth tanned skin. The suit was made of one of the newer bioplastic materials, and its living tissues were still growing, softly adapting themselves to the contours of her body, repairing themselves as the fibres became worn or grimy. Upstairs in her wardrobes the gowns and dresses purred on their hangars like the drowsing inmates of some exquisite arboreal zoo. Sometimes she thought of commissioning her little Mercurian tailor to run up a bioplastic suit for Clifford—a specially designed suit that would begin to constrict one night as he stood on the terrace, the lapels growing tighter and tighter around his neck, the sleeves pinning his arms to his sides, the waist contracting to pitch him over—

"Margot!" Trantino interrupted her reverie, sailed the jet-ball expertly through the air towards her. Annoyed, Margot caught it with one hand and pointed it away, watched it sail over the wall and the roofs beyond.

TRANTINO came up to her. "What's the matter?" he asked anxiously. For his part he felt his inability to soothe Margot a reflection on his professional skill. The privileges of his caste had to be guarded jealously. For several centuries now the managerial and technocratic elite had been so preoccupied with the work of government that they relied on the Templars of Aphrodite not merely to guard their wives from any marauding suitors but also to keep them amused and contented. By definition, of course, their relationship was platonic, a pleasant revival of the old chivalrous ideals, but sometimes Trantino regretted that the only tools in his armory were a handful of poems and empty romantic gestures. The Guild of which he was a novitiate member was an ancient and honored one, and it wouldn't do if Margot began to pine and Mr. Gorrell reported him to the Masters of the Guild.

"Why are you always arguing with Mr. Gorrell?" Trantino asked her. One of the Guild's axioms was 'The husband is *always* right'. Any discord between him and his wife was the responsibility of the play-boy.

Margot ignored Trantino's question. "Those trees are getting on my nerves," she complained fractiously. "Why can't they keep quiet?"

"They're mating," Trantino told her. He added thoughtfully: "You should sing to Mr. Gorrell."

Margot stirred lazily as the shoulder straps of the sun-suit

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unclasped themselves behind her back. "Tino," she asked, "what's the most unpleasant thing I could do to Mr. Gorrell?"

"Margot!" Trantino gasped, utterly shocked. He decided that an appeal to sentiment, a method of reconciliation despised by the more proficient members of the Guild, was his only hope. "Remember, Margot, you will always have me."

He was about to permit himself a melancholy smile when Margot sat up abruptly.

"Don't look so frightened, you fool! I've just got an idea that should make Mr. Gorrell sing to me."

She straightened the vanes in her hat, waited for the sun-suit to clasp itself discreetly around her, then pushed Trantino aside and stalked off the terrace.

CLIFFORD was browsing among the spools in the library, quietly listening to an old 22nd Century abstract on systems of land tenure in the Trianguli.

"Hello, Margot, feel better now?"

Margot smiled at him coyly. "Clifford, I'm ashamed of myself. Do forgive me." She bent down and nuzzled his ear. "Sometimes I'm very selfish. Have you booked our tickets yet?"

Clifford disengaged her arm and straightened his collar. "I called the agency, but their bookings have been pretty heavy. They've got a double but no singles. We'll have to wait a few days."

"No, we won't," Margot exclaimed brightly. "Clifford, why don't you and I take the double? Then we can really be together, forget all that ship-board nonsense about never having met before."

Puzzled, Clifford switched off the player. "What do you mean?"

Margot explained. "Look, Clifford, I've been thinking that I ought to spend more time with you than I do at present, really share your work and hobbies. I'm tired of all these play-boys." She drooped languidly against Clifford, her voice silky and reassuring. "I want to be with you, Clifford. *Always.*"

Clifford pushed her away. "Don't be silly, Margot," he said with an anxious laugh. "You're being absurd."

"No, I'm not. After all, Harold Kharkov and his wife haven't got a play-boy and she's very happy."

Maybe she is, Clifford thought, beginning to panic. Kharkov had once been the powerful and ruthless director of the Department of Justice, now was a third-rate attorney hopelessly trying to eke out a meagre living on the open market, dominated by his wife and forced to spend virtually 24 hours a day with her. For a mo-

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ment Clifford thought of the days when he had courted Margot, of the long dreadful hours listening to her inane chatter. Trantino's real role was not to chaperone Margot while Clifford was away but while he was at home.

"Margot, be sensible," he started to say, but she cut him short. "I've made up my mind, I'm going to tell Trantino to pack his suitcase and go back to the Guild." She switched on the spool player, selecting the wrong speed, smiling ecstatically as the reading head grated loudly and stripped the coding off the record. "It's going to be wonderful to share everything with you. Why don't we forget about the vacation this year?"

A facial tic from which Clifford had last suffered at the age of ten began to twitch ominously.

TONY Harcourt, Clifford's personal assistant, came over to the Gorrell's villa immediately after lunch. He was a brisk, polished young man, barely controlling his annoyance at being called back to work on the first day of his vacation. He had carefully booked a sleeper next to Dolores Costane, the most beautiful of the Jovian Heresiarch's vestals, on board a leisure-liner leaving that afternoon for Venus, but instead of enjoying the fruits of weeks of blackmail and intrigue he was having to take part in what seemed a quite uncharacteristic piece of Gorrell whimsy.

He listened in growing bewilderment as Clifford explained.

"We were going to one of our usual resorts on Luna, Tony, but we've decided we need a change. Margot wants a vacation that's different. Something new, exciting, original. So go round all the agencies and bring me their suggestions."

"All the agencies?" Tony queried. "Don't you mean just the registered ones?"

"All of them," Margot told him smugly, relishing every moment of her triumph.

Clifford nodded, and smiled at Margot benignly.

"But there must be 50 or 60 agencies organizing vacations," Tony protested. "Only about a dozen of them are accredited. Outside Empyrean Tours and Union-Galactic there'll be absolutely nothing suitable for you."

"Never mind," Clifford said blandly. "We only want an idea of the field. I'm sorry, Tony, but I don't want this all over the Department and I know you'll be discreet."

Tony groaned. "It'll take me weeks."

"Three days," Clifford told him. "Margot and I want to leave here by the end of the week." He looked longingly over his shoulder for the absent Trantino. "Be-

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lieve me, Tony, we really need a holiday."

FIFTY-SIX travel and vacation agencies were listed in the Commercial Directory, Tony discovered when he returned to his office in the top floor of the Justice building in down-town Zenith, all but eight of them alien. The Department had initiated legal proceedings against five, three had closed down, and eight more were fronts for other enterprises.

That left him with forty to visit, spread all over the Upper and Lower Cities and in the Colonial Bazaar, attached to various mercantile, religious and paramilitary organizations, some of them huge concerns with their own police and ecclesiastical forces, others sharing a one-room office and transceiver with a couple of other shoestring firms.

Tony mapped out an itinerary, slipped a flask of Five-Anchor Neptunian Rum into his hip pocket and dialled a helicab.

The first was ARCO PRODUCTIONS INC., a large establishment occupying three levels and a bunker on the fashionable west side of the Upper City. According to the Directory they specialized in hunting and shooting expeditions.

The helicab put him down on the apron outside the entrance. Massive steel columns reached up to a reinforced concrete portico, and the whole place looked less like a travel agency than the last redoubt of some interstellar Seigfreid. As he went in a smart jackbooted guard of janissaries in black and silver uniforms snapped to attention and presented arms.

Everyone inside the building was wearing a uniform, moving about busily at standby alert. A huge broad-shouldered woman with sergeant's stripes handed Tony over to a hard-faced Martian colonel.

I'M making some inquiries on behalf of a wealthy Terran and his wife," Tony explained. "They thought they'd do a little big-game hunting on their vacation this year. I believe you organize expeditions."

The colonel nodded curtly and led Tony over to a broad map-table. "Certainly. What exactly have they in mind?"

"Well, nothing really. They hoped you'd make some suggestions."

"Of course." The colonel pulled out a memo-tape. "Have they their own air and land forces?"

Tony shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"I see. Can you tell me whether they will require a single army corps, a combined task force or—"

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"No," Tony said. "Nothing as big as that."

"An assault party of brigade strength? I understand. Quieter and less elaborate. All the fashion today." He switched on the star-map and spread his hands across the glimmering screen of stars and nebulae. "Now the question of the particular theatre. At present only three of the game reserves have open seasons. Firstly the Procyon system; this includes about 20 different races, some of them still with only atomic technologies. Unfortunately there's been a good deal of dispute recently about declaring Procyon a game reserve, and the Resident of Alschain is trying to have it admitted to the Pan-Galactic Conference. A pity, I feel," the colonel added, reflectively stroking his steel-grey moustache. "Procyon always put up a great fight against us and an expedition there was invariably lively."

Tony nodded sympathetically. "I hadn't realized they objected."

The colonel glanced at him sharply. "Naturally," he said. He cleared his throat. "That leaves only the Ketab tribes of Ursa Major, who are having their Millennial Wars, and the Sudor Martines of Orion. They are an entirely new reserve, and your best choice without doubt. The ruling dynasty died out recently, and a war of succession could be conveniently arranged."

TONY was no longer following the colonel, but he smiled intelligently.

"Now," the colonel asked, "what political or spiritual creeds do your friends wish to have invoked?"

Tony frowned. "I don't think they want any. Are they absolutely necessary?"

The colonel regarded Tony carefully. "No," he said slowly. "It's a question of taste. A purely military operation is perfectly feasible. However, we always advise our clients to invoke some doctrine as a *casus belli*, not only to avoid adverse publicity and any feelings of guilt or remorse, but to lend color and purpose to the campaign. Each of our field commanders specializes in a particular ideological pogrom, with the exception of General Westerling. Perhaps your friends would prefer him?"

Tony's mind started to work again. "Schapiro Westerling? The former Director-General of Graves Commission?"

The colonel nodded. "You know him?"

Tony laughed. "Know him? I thought I was prosecuting him at the current Nova Trials. I can see that we're well behind with the times." He pushed back his chair. "To tell the truth I don't

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think you've anything suitable for my friends. Thanks all the same."

The colonel stiffened. One of his hands moved below the desk and a buzzer sounded along the wall.

"However," Tony added, "I'd be grateful if you'd send them further details."

The colonel sat impassively in his chair. Three enormous guards appeared at Tony's elbow, idly swinging energy truncheons.

"Clifford Gorrell, Stellar Probate Division, Department of Justice," Tony said quickly.

He gave the colonel a brief smile and made his way out, cursing Clifford and walking warily across the thickly-piled carpet in case it had been mined.

THE next one on his list was the A-Z JOLLY JUBILEE COMPANY, alien and unregistered, head office somewhere out of Betelgeuse. According to the Directory they specialized in 'all-in cultural parties and guaranteed somatic weekends.' Their premises occupied the top two tiers of a hanging garden in the Colonial Bazaar. They sounded harmless enough but Tony was ready for them.

"No," he said firmly to a lovely Antarean wraith-fern who shyly raised a frond to him as he crossed the terrace. "Not today."

Behind the bar a fat man in an asbestos suit was feeding sand to a siliconic fire-fish swimming round in a pressure brazier.

"Damn things," he grumbled, wiping the sweat off his chin and fiddling aimlessly with the thermostat. "They gave me a booklet when I got it, but it doesn't say anything about it eating a whole beach every day." He spaded in another couple of shovels from a low dune of sand heaped on the floor behind him. "You have to keep them at exactly 5750°K. or they start getting nervous. Can I help you?"

"I thought there was a vacation agency here," Tony said.

"Sure. I'll call the girls for you." He pressed a bell.

"Wait a minute," Tony cut in. "You advertise something about cultural parties. What exactly are they?"

The fat man chuckled. "That must be my partner. He's a professor at Vega Tech. Likes to keep the tone up." He winked at Tony.

Tony sat on one of the stools, looking out over the crazy spiral roof-tops of the Bazaar. A mile away the police patrols circled over the big apartment batteries which marked the perimeter of the Bazaar, keeping their distance.

A tall slim woman appeared from behind the foliage and

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sauntered across the terrace to him. She was a Canopan slave, hot-housed out of imported germ, a slender green-skinned beauty with moth-like fluttering gills.

The fat man introduced Tony. "Lucille, take him up to the arbour and give him a run through."

Tony tried to protest but the pressure brazier was hissing fiercely. The fat man started feeding sand in furiously, the exhaust flames flaring across the terrace.

Quickly, Tony turned and backed up the stairway to the arbour. "Lucille," he reminded her firmly, "this is strictly cultural, remember."

HALF an hour later a dull boom reverberated up from the terrace.

"Poor Jumbo," Lucille said sadly as a fine rain of sand came down over them.

"Poor Jumbo," Tony agreed, sitting back and playing with a coil of her hair. Like a soft sinuous snake, it circled around his arm, sleek with blue oil. He drained the flask of Five-Anchor and tossed it lightly over the balustrade. "Now tell me more about these Canopan prayer-beds. . . ."

WHEN, after two days, Tony reported back to the Gorrells he looked hollow-eyed and exhausted, like a man who had been brain-washed by the Wardens.

"What happened to you?" Margot asked anxiously, "we thought you'd been going round the agencies."

"Exactly," Tony said. He slumped down in a sofa and tossed a thick folder across to Clifford. "Take your pick. You've got about 250 schemes there in complete detail, but I've written out a synopsis which gives one or two principal suggestions from each agency. Most of them are out of the question."

Clifford unclipped the snyopsis and started to read through it.

(1) ARCO PRODUCTIONS INC. Unregistered. Private subsidiary of Sagittarius Security Police.

Hunting and shooting. Your own war to order. Raiding parties, revolutions, religious crusades. In anything from a small commando squad to a 3,000-ship armada. ARCO provide publicity, mock War Crimes Tribunal, etc. Samples:

(a) Operation Torquemada. 23-day expedition to Bellatrix IV. 20-ship assault corps under Admiral Storm Wengen. Mission: liberation of (imaginary) Terran hostages. Cost: 300,000 credits.

(b) Operation Klingsor 15-year crusade against Ursa Major. Combined task force of 2,500

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ships. Mission: recovery of runic memory dials stolen from client's shrine.

Cost: 500 billion credits (ARCO will arrange lend-lease but this is dabbling in realpolitik).

(2) ARENA FEATURES INC. Unregistered. Organizers of the Pan-Galactic Tournament held tri-millennially at the Sun Bowl, 2-Heliopolis, NGC 3599.

Every conceivable game in the Cosmos is played at the tournament and so formidable is the opposition that a winning contestant can virtually choose his own apotheosis. The challenge round of the Solar Megathlon, Group 3 (that is, for any being whose function can be described, however loosely, as living) involves Quantum Jumping, 7-dimentional Maze Ball and Psychokinetic Bridge (pretty tricky against a telepathic Ketos D'Oma). The only Terran ever to win an event was the redoubtable Chippy Yerkes of Altair 5 The Clowns, who introduced the unplayable blank Round Dice. Being a spectator is as exhausting as being a contestant, and you're well advised to substitute.

Cost: 100,000 credits/day.

(3) AGENCE GENERALE DE TOURISME. Registered. Venus.

Concessionaires for the Colony Beatific on Lake Virgo, the Mandrake Casino Circuit and the Miramar-Trauma Senso-channels. Dream-baths, vu-dromes, endocrine-galas. Darleen Costello is the current Aphrodite and Laurence Mandell makes a versatile Lothario. Plug into these two from 30:30 VST. Room and non-denominational bath at the Gomorrah-Plaza on Mount Venus comes to 1,000 credits a day, but remember to keep out of the Zone. It's just too erotogenous for a Terran.

(4) TERMINAL TOURS LTD. Unregistered. Earth.

For those who want to get away from it all the *Dream of Osiris*, an astral-rigged, 1,000-foot leisure-liner is now fitting out for the Grand Tour. Round-cosmos cruise, visiting every known race and galaxy.

Cost: Doubles at a flat billion, but it's cheap when you realize that the cruise lasts for ever and you'll never be back.

(5) SLEEP TRADERS. Unregistered.

A somewhat shadowy group who handle all dealings on the Blue Market, acting as a general clearing house and buying and selling dreams all through the Galaxy.

Sample: Like to try a really new sort of dream? The Set Corrani Priests of Theta Piscium will link you up with the sacred

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electronic thought-pools in the Desert of Kish. These mercury lakes are their ancestral memory banks. Surgery is necessary but be careful. Too much cortical damage and the archetypes may get restive. In return one of the Set Corrani (polysexual delta-humanoids about the size of a walking dragline) will take over your cerebral functions for a long weekend. All these transactions are done on an exchange basis and SLEEP TRADERS charge nothing for the service. But they obviously get a rake-off, and may pump advertising into the lower medullary centres. Whatever they're selling I wouldn't advise anybody to buy.

(6) THE AGENCY. Registered. M33 in Andromeda.

The executive authority of the consortium of banking trusts floating Schedule D, the fourth draw of the gigantic PK pyramid lottery sweeping all through the continuum from Sol III out to the island universes. Trance-cells everywhere are now recruiting dream-readers and ESPerceptionists, and there's still time to buy a ticket. There's only one number on all the tickets—the winning one—but don't think that means you'll get away with the kitty. THE AGENCY has just launched UNILIV, the emergency relief fund for victims of Schedule C who lost their deposits and are now committed to paying off impossible debts, some monetary, some moral (if you're unlucky in the draw you may find yourself landed with a guilt complex that would make even a Colonus Rex look sad.)

Cost: 1 credit—but with an evaluation in the billions if you have to forfeit.

(7) ARCTURIAN EXPRESS. Unregistered.

Controls all important track events. The racing calendar this year is a causal and not a temporal one and seems a little obscure, but most of the established classics are taking place.

(a) The Rhinosaur Derby. Held this year at Betelgeuse Springs under the rules of the Federation of Amorphs. First to the light horizon. There's always quite a line-up for this one and any form of vehicle is allowed—rockets, beams, racial migrations, ES thought patterns—but frankly it's a waste of effort. It's not just that by the time you're out of your own sight you're usually out of your mind as well, but the Nils of Rigel, who always enter a strong team, are capable of instantaneous transmission.

(b) The Paraplegic Handicap Recently instituted by the Protists of Lambda Scorpio. The course measures only 0.00015 mm., but that's a long way to urge an Aldebaran Torpid. They

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are giant viruses embedded in bauxite mountains, and by varying their pressure differentials it's sometimes possible to tickle them into a little life. K 2 on Regulus IX is holding the big bets, but even so the race is estimated to take about 50,000 years to run.

(8) NEW FUTURES INC. Unregistered.

Tired of the same dull round? NEW FUTURES will take you right out of this world. In the island universes the continuum is extra-dimensional, and the time channels are controlled by rival cartels. The element of chance apparently plays the time role, and it's all even more confused by the fact that you may be moving around in someone else's extrapolation.

In the tourist translation manual 185 basic tenses are given, and of these 125 are future conditional. No verb conjugates in the present tense, and you can invent and copyright your own irregulars. This may explain why I got the impression at the bureau that they were only half there.

Cost: simultaneously 3, 270 and 2,000,000 credits. They refuse to quibble.

(9) SEVEN SIRENS. Registered. Venus.

A subsidiary of the fashion trust controlling senso-channel Astral Eve.

Ladies, like to win your own beauty contest? Twenty-five of the most beautiful creatures in the Galaxy are waiting to pit their charms against yours, but however divine they may be—and two or three of them, such as the Flamen Zilla QuelQueen (75-9-25) and the Orthodox Virgin of Altair (76-953-?) certainly will be—they'll stand no chance against you. Your specifications will be defined as the ideal ones.

(10) GENERAL ENTERPRISES INC. Registered.

Specialists in culture cycles, world struggles, ethnic trends. Organize vacations as a sideline. A vast undertaking for whom ultimately we all work. Their next venture, epoch-making by all accounts, is starting now, and everybody will be coming along. I was politely but firmly informed that it was no use worrying about the cost. When I asked—

BEFORE Clifford could finish one of the houseboys came up to him.

"Priority Call for you, sir."

Clifford handed the synopsis to Margot. "Tell me if you find anything. It looks to me as if we've been wasting Tony's time."

He left them and went through to his study.

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"Ah, Gorrell, there you are." It was Thornwall Harrison, the attorney who had taken over Clifford's office. "Who the hell are all these people trailing in to see you night and day? The place looks like Colonial Night at the Arena Circus. I can't get rid of them."

"Which people?" Clifford asked. "What do they want?"

"You, apparently," Thornwall told him. "Most of them thought I was you. They've been trying to sell me all sorts of crazy vacation schemes. I said you'd already gone on your vacation and I myself never took one. Then one of them pulled a hypodermic on me. There's even an Anti-Cartel agent sleuthing around, wants to see you about block bookings. Thinks you're a racketeer."

BACK in the lounge Margot and Tony were looking out through the terrace windows into the boulevard which ran from the Gorrell's villa to the level below.

A long column of vehicles had pulled up under the trees: trucks, half-tracks, huge Telesenso studio location vans and several sleek white ambulances. The drivers and crew-men were standing about in little groups in the shadows, quietly watching the villa. Two or three radar scanners on the vans were rotating, and as Clifford looked down a convoy of trucks drove up and joined the tail of the column.

"Looks like there's going to be quite a party," Tony said. "What are they waiting for?"

"Perhaps they've come for us?" Margot suggested excitedly.

"They're wasting their time if they have," Clifford told her. He swung round on Tony. "Did you give our names to any of the agencies?"

Tony hesitated, then nodded. "I couldn't help it. Some of those outfits wouldn't take no for an answer."

Clifford clamped his lips and picked the synopsis off the floor. "Well, Margot, have you decided where you want to go?"

Margot fiddled with the synopsis. "There are so many to choose from."

Tony started for the door. "Well, I'll leave you to it." He waved a hand at them. "Have fun."

"Hold on," Clifford told him. "Margot hasn't made up her mind yet."

"What's the hurry?" Tony asked. He indicated the line of vehicles outside, their crews now climbing into their driving cabs and turrets. "Take your time. You may bite off more than you can chew."

"Exactly. So as soon as Margot decides where we're going

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you can make the final arrangements for us and get rid of that menagerie."

"But Clifford, give me a chance."

"Sorry. Now Margot, hurry up."

MARGOT flipped through the synopsis, screwing up her mouth. "It's so difficult, Clifford, I don't really like any of these. I still think the best agency was the little one I found in the Bazaar.

"No." Tony groaned, sinking down on a sofa. "Margot, please, after all the trouble I've gone to."

"Yes, definitely that one. The dream bureau. What was it called—"

Before she could finish there was a roar of engines starting up in the boulevard. Startled, Clifford saw the column of cars and trucks churn across the gravel towards the villa. Music, throbbing heavily, came down from the room above, and a sick musky odor seeped through the air.

Tony pulled himself off the sofa. "They must have had this place wired," he said quickly. "You'd better call the police. Believe me, some of these people don't waste time arguing."

Outside three helmetted men in brown uniforms ran past the terrace, unwinding a coil of fuse wire. The sharp hissing sound of para-rays sucked through the air from the drive.

Margot hid back in her slumber seat. "Trantino!" she wailed.

Clifford went back into his study. He switched the transceiver to the emergency channel.

Instead of the police signal a thin automatic voice beeped through. "Remain seated, remain seated. Take-off in zero two minutes, Purser's office on G Deck now—"

Clifford switched to another channel. There was a blare of studio applause and a loud unctuous voice called out:

"And now over to brilliant young Clifford Gorrell and his charming wife Margot about to enter their dream-pool at the fabulous Riviera-Neptune. Are you there, Cliff?"

Angrily, Clifford turned to a third. Static and morse chattered, and then someone rapped out in a hard iron tone: "Colonel Sapt is dug in behind the swimming pool. Enfilade along the garage roof—"

Clifford gave up. He went back to the lounge. The music was deafening. Margot was prostrate in her slumber-seat, Tony down on the floor by the window, watching a pitched battle raging in the drive. Heavy black palls of smoke drifted across the terrace, and two tanks with stylized archers emblazoned on their turrets were moving up past the burning

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wrecks of the studio location vans.

"They must be Arco's!" Tony shouted. "The police will look after them, but wait until the extra-sensory gang take over!"

CROUCHING behind a low stone parapet running off the terrace was a group of waiters in dishevelled evening dress, lab technicians in scorched white overalls and musicians clutching their instrument cases. A bolt of flame from one of the tanks flickered over their heads and crashed into the grove of flamingo trees, sending up a shower of sparks and broken notes.

Clifford pulled Tony to his feet. "Come on, we've got to get out of here. "We'll try the library windows into the garden. You'd better take Margot."

Her yellow beach robe had apparently died of shock, and was beginning to blacken like a dried-out banana skin. Discreetly averting his eyes, Tony picked her up and followed Clifford out into the hall.

Three croupiers in gold uniforms were arguing hotly with two men in white surgeons coats. Behind them a couple of mechanics were struggling a huge vibro-bath up the stairs.

The foreman came over to Clifford. "Gorrell?" he asked, consulting an invoice. "Trans-Ocean." He jerked a thumb at the bath. "Where do you want it?"

A surgeon elbowed him aside. "Mr. Gorrell?" he asked suavely. "We are from Cerebro-Tonic Travel. Please allow me to give you a sedative. All this noise—"

Clifford pushed past him and started to walk down the corridor to the library, but the floor began to slide and weave.

He stopped and looked around unsteadily.

Tony was down on his knees, Margot flopped out of his arms across the floor.

Someone swayed up to Clifford and held out a tray.

On it were three tickets.

Around him the walls whirled.

HE woke in his bedroom, lying comfortably on his back, gently breathing a cool amber air. The noise had died away, but he could still hear a vortex of sound spinning violently in the back of his mind. It spiralled away, vanished, and he moved his head and looked around.

Margot was lying asleep beside him, and for a moment he thought that the attack on the house had been a dream. Then he noticed the skull-plate clamped over his head, and the cables leading off from a boom to a large console at the foot of the bed. Massive spools loaded with magnetic tape waited in the projector ready to be played.

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The real nightmare was still to come! He struggled to get up, found himself clamped in a twilight sleep, unable to move more than a few centimetres.

He lay there powerlessly for ten minutes, tongue clogging his mouth like a wad of cotton-wool when he tried to shout. Eventually a small neatly featured alien in a pink silk suit opened the door and padded quietly over to them. He peered down at their faces and then turned a couple of knobs on the console.

Clifford's consciousness began to clear. Beside him Margot stirred and woke.

The alien beamed down pleasantly. "Good evening," he greeted them in a smooth creamy voice. "Please allow me to apologize for any discomfort you have suffered. However, the first day of a vacation is often a little confused."

Margot sat up. "I remember you. You're from the little bureau in the Bazaar." She jumped round happily. "Clifford!"

The alien bowed. "Of course, Mrs. Gorrell. I am Dr. Terence Sotal-2 Burlington, Professor—Emeritus," he added to himself as an afterthought, "—of Applied Drama at the University of Alpha Leporis, and the director of the play you and your husband are to perform during your vacation."

Clifford cut in: "Would you release me from this machine immediately? And then get out of my house! I've had—"

"Clifford!" Margot snapped. "What's the matter with you?"

Clifford dragged at the skull plate and Dr. Burlington quietly moved a control on the console. Part of Clifford's brain clouded and he sank back helplessly.

"Everything is all right, Mr. Gorrell," Dr. Burlington said.

"Clifford," Margot warned him. "Remember your promise." She smiled at Dr. Burlington. "Don't pay any attention to him, Doctor. Please go on."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gorrell." Dr. Burlington bowed again, as Clifford lay half-asleep, groaning impotently.

THE play we have designed for you," Dr. Burlington explained, "is an adaptation of a classic masterpiece in the Diphenyl 2-4-6 Cyclopropane canon, and though based on the oldest of human situations, is nonetheless fascinating. It was recently declared the outright winner at the Mira Nuptial Contest, and will always have a proud place in the private repertoires. To you, I believe, it is known as 'The Taming of the Shrew.'"

Margot giggled and then looked surprised. Dr. Burlington smiled urbanely. "However, allow me to show you the script." He excused himself and slipped out.

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Margot fretted anxiously, while Clifford pulled weakly at the skull-plate.

"Clifford, I'm not sure that I like this altogether. And Dr. Burlington does seem rather strange. But I suppose it's only for three weeks."

Just then the door opened and a stout bearded figure, erect in a stiff blue uniform, white yachting cap jauntily on his head, stepped in.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gorrell." He saluted Margot smartly, "Captain Linstrom." He looked down at Clifford. "Good to have you aboard, sir."

"Aboard?" Clifford repeated weakly. He looked around at the familiar furniture in the room, the curtains drawn neatly over the windows. "What are you raving about? Get out of my house!"

The Captain chuckled. "Your husband has a sense of humor, Mrs. Gorrell. A useful asset on these long trips. Your friend Mr. Harcourt in the next cabin seems sadly lacking in one."

"Tony?" Margot exclaimed. "Is he still here?"

Captain Linstrom laughed. "I quite understand you. He seems very worried, quite over-eager to return to Mars. We shall be passing there one day, of course, though not I fear for some time. However, time is no longer a consideration to you. I believe you are to spend the entire voyage in sleep. But a very pleasantly colored sleep nonetheless." He smiled roguishly at Margot.

As he reached the door Clifford managed to gasp out: "Where are we? For heaven's sake, call the police!"

Captain Linstrom paused in surprise. "But surely you know, Mr. Gorrell?" He strode to the window and flung back the curtains. In place of the large square casement were three small portholes. Outside a blaze of incandescent light flashed by, a rush of stars and nebulae.

Captain Linstrom gestured theatrically. "This is the *Dream of Osiris*, under charter to Terminal Tours, three hours out from Zenith City on the non-stop run. May I wish you sweet dreams!"

THE END

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By ROGER ZELAZNY

The Misfit

He didn't like the army. He didn't want to be a doctor with a beautiful nurse. He didn't want to kill all the aliens singlehanded. What was with him anyway?

JACKSON returned the General's stare.

"I will *not* stand at attention, and you can go to hell!"

The General beetled his brows.

"What is it with you?"

"I want out of this chicken outfit."

"I told you last week that I'd approve your transfer."

"That's not what I mean."

"What then?"

"I am not Colonel Jackson and you are not General Paine. This place only exists in my mind, and I want to change my mind."

The General sighed.

"Okay, Jackson, that's your privilege. What'll it be this time? The Navy?"

"I want out from the whole military—like a civilian, like something enjoyable."

"Name it."

Doctor Jackson tore off his rubber gloves and flung them into the corner. Miss Mayor, amazing despite starch, came up behind him and wrapped wonderful arms about his chest. She pressed her cheek to his neck.

"You're famous already, Jack. Forty-four brain operations in a month—all of them delicate and complicated—and all successful! What a record you've achiev—"

"Okay! Okay!"

"What's the matter, Jackie? Have I done something?"

"No!"

"Then why are you hollering? Oh, I should have realized—you're tired, on edge. After an operation like that last one, anybody—"

"I am *not* tired!"

"You *must* be!"

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"How can I be tired without having done anything?"

"I don't understand you . . ."

"The hell you don't!"

"I don't like Jackie when he uses naughty words."

"Then step over to that corner and turn into a table," he pointed, "with a bowl of chrysanthemums on it."

"What do you mean?"

She moved around him and stared up into his eyes. All at once she was the loveliest, most desirable woman in creation.

"What's it with you, anyhow?" she asked.

He bit his lip.

"With a bowl of chrysanthemums," he repeated.

"Are you certain?" she sighed.

He nodded.

THE rocket dropped to the rainbow desert like a red-stemmed flower growing backward to seed. Shortly the red vanished and the steel pod lay upon Jackson Plains. Professor Jackson strode out onto Jackson's World and sniffed the smoke-blue, November-cold air. He studied the unit he carried, then spoke into the microphone at his throat.

"It's all right. You can come out."

His three companions, tanned despite the long voyage, lean, tall and grinning, strode through the hatchway and looked about, all recklessness and competency.

"By golly, you were right, Doc! It *is* habitable!"

"Of course it is. Jackson is never wrong."

Jackson nodded in a perfunctory manner and proceeded to orient the photomap.

"The ruins are that way," he pointed.

They swung into step beside him.

Something was gnawing within his mind, tingling at the base of his skull.

Half an hour, it seemed. They paused beside a hedge of jagged monoliths.

"This is a mighty weird place," Mason was drawling, Tennessee-ish.

A ululating cry from above and Mason collapsed, spitting blood. The spear had passed entirely through him, hurled with enormous force. Jackson threw himself flat.

Thompson screamed and coughed once, moistly.

Blaster in hand, Jackson glanced at Wolf.

"Did you get a look at what did it?"

"Yeah," whispered the man. "Wish I hadn't. It was horrible—all those arms, that green skin, those bug eyes—"

Thompson emptied his lungs for the last time.

Another banshee cry, nearer. Jackson wormed his way to the

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right, then he waited quietly.

The faintest of ticks, metal kissing stone . . .

He sprang to his feet, triggering a bolt of flame.

The thing fell, slavering. A greenish ichor dripped from the great hole his shot had torn in its midsection.

. . . And something in the back of his head was tingling.

"Doc, there's more of 'em!"

He heard the crackle of Wolf's blaster, the sizzle of frying flesh. Two of the creatures fell.

Four more were sliding down the slope toward him.

He turned and shot Wolf. Then he tossed his blaster over his shoulder.

"Go ahead," he called, "I'm anxious to see how you squirm out of this one."

The aliens were almost upon him when a great hissing shape reared from behind a rock and slithered in their direction. They halted, uttering brief cries, then turned and retreated back up the hill.

He followed.

"Pretty good," he told the huge snake. "Passable, anyhow."

It dropped to near his height, peering at him.

"I'm tired of suspending disbelief," he told it.

The snake seemed to sigh.

"I'm curious whether I could die from one of these," said Jackson.

"It is physiologically possible," answered the snake, "but it is forbidden. What is it with you, anyhow?"

"Couldn't you just let me wake up?"

"No."

"Why not? I would like to know why I'm here."

"Such memories do not exist. You will never know. It had to be that way."

"And I will dream forever?"

"For the rest of your life."

"Was it the population problem?—The other planets uninhabitable, interstellar travel impossible, and people stacked like cordwood in glass coffins?"

"I couldn't say."

"And you are the machine, talking through an electrode in my skull, feeding me, programming my wish-fulfillments?"

"If you want it that way."

"I don't. Am I in a coma? Did I have an accident? Is this some kind of drug therapy?"

"Call it anything you want."

"When will I wake up?"

"You are awake."

"You have to say that. Whatever sort of machine you are, that's the way you're programmed."

"Then why ask?"

He looked about for the blaster. It was gone.

Suddenly, it was in his hand.

"If you want to kill the snake, go ahead."

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Quickly, he turned it toward his own head. It vanished.

"You can't."

His hands fell to his sides.

"Could this be hell?"

"If you wish."

"*Can't* I wake up?"

"Are you certain that's what you want? There *are* certain provisions."

"I want to try it."

"So be it."

THE transparent lid of the case had slid open above him. His muscles were spaghetti and his throat was dry and his left arm was porcupined with syrettes. After a long while he managed to withdraw their bright points. Keeping his arm tightly bent, the lesions stayed under direct pressure. With his right hand he reached behind his head. He felt an electrode taped to his shaven skull.

As he moved to draw it away a voice rang in his head:

"If you are disappointed with reality, come lie down again—replace the needles, replace the contact."

"I won't," he muttered, tearing it loose.

He struggled to his feet and went in search of anybody.

* * *

It had been the only way to solve the population problem, said Mannerung. Put everyone to sleep, awaken key scientists at different times, to work on interstellar flight, maintain a skeleton crew to service the Regulator. Let the fifty billion sleepers dream under glass—they're better off than they could ever be awake.

"It takes a peculiar sort," the Doctor had told him, "to prefer the mundane to the extraordinary, the humdrum to the satisfaction of his desires. Provisions had to be made for such people, of course. If a dreamer is sufficiently disturbed, the Regulator will permit him to awaken. We can always find something for him to do. There is much minor drudgery to the maintenance of the machinery. If that's what you want, you're elected. You can start by replacing some tubes in this subsection unit."

He passed him a chart.

"Here's the diagram. They're all numbered. The ones circled in red need to be replaced. When you're finished with that, you can start straightening out that storeroom." He pointed. "It's a mess. You're sure this is what you want?"

"Yes," said Jackson, "the other way was—well, parasitism. It was too good, and too useless."

"Okay then, get to it."

Humming happily, he went off after the tubes.

Finally knowing what it was with Jackson, the Mannerung-figure did not sigh. **THE END**

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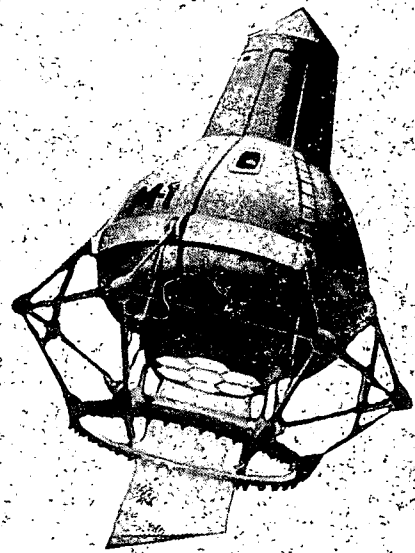
THE MOST THRILLING

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD



EDMOND HAMILTON	THE STARS, MY BROTHERS
HENRY HASSE	THE BEGINNING
ROBERT SILVERBERG	DARK COMPANION
ADAM CHASE	HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT I
GERALD VANCE	THE LAVENDER TALENT
J.G. BALLARD	PASSPORT TO ETERNITY
ROGER ZELAZNY	THE MISFIT

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